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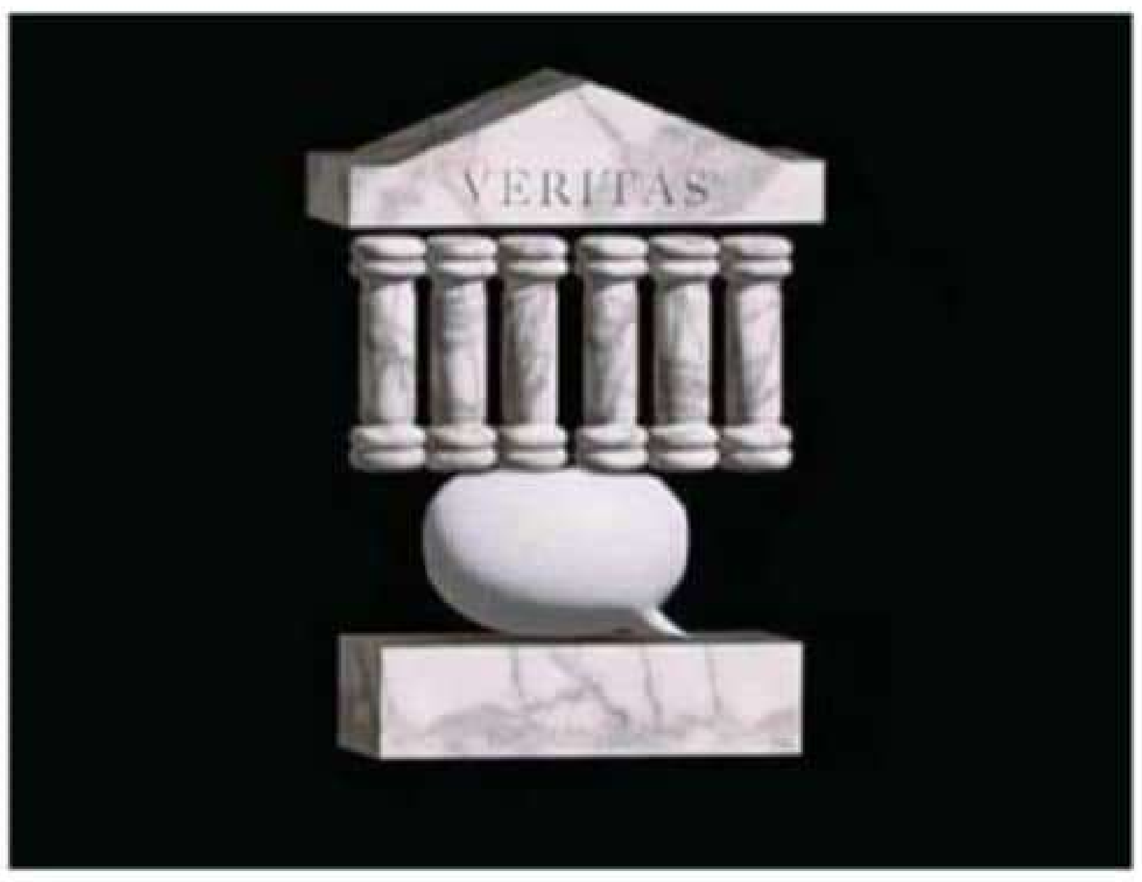
ELEMENTS
Meera Subramanian writes about efforts to save vultures in Nepal after a sharp decline in their population.



THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Jeannie Suk Gersen on how anti-Israel protests have transformed the debate over academic freedom.

LEFT: ALISHA VASUDEV; RIGHT: NICHOLAS KONRAD

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THE MAIL

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

I very much enjoyed Zach Helfand's thorough and interesting piece on tipping ("Tipping Points," January 1st & 8th). However, the story about the word "tip" beginning as an acronym for "To Insure Promptitude," sometime in the eighteenth century, is almost surely apocryphal, as are most rumored etymologies involving acronyms, which did not become widespread until the twentieth century.

According to Douglas Harper's Online Etymology Dictionary, the use of "tip" to mean "give a gratuity to" first appeared in 1706, and is believed to derive from its use in thieves' jargon to mean "give, hand, pass." In 1909, a version of the claim about the acronym which Helfand cites appeared in Frederick W. Hackwood's book "Inns, Ales and Drinking Customs of Old England." A reviewer debunked it that same year, writing, "We deprecate the careless repetition of popular etymologies such as the notion that 'tip' originated from an abbreviated inscription on a box placed on the sideboard in old coaching-inns, the full meaning of which was 'To Insure Promptitude.'"

Kate Deimling
Brooklyn, N.Y.

WITHIN THE WALLS

Alec MacGillis rightfully draws attention to the growing issue of student absenteeism ("Showing Up," January 15th). But I wish that his article had looked more closely at what school is actually like for its students, especially those from the backgrounds depicted. For example, MacGillis's account of how schooling became compulsory in the United States does not mention that public schools first gained traction in the nineteenth century as places where immigrants, Native Americans, and other marginalized groups could be controlled, or that state-run schools have often served to justify and maintain racial and class hierarchies.

MacGillis's reporting demonstrates how the pandemic and its myriad upheavals have contributed to increased absences; had the piece included classroom scenes or more interviews with students, it might also have shown how, for so many families, school has never lived up to its promise of generating social mobility, and has instead served as a mind-numbing and invalidating space.

Jerald Isseks
Brooklyn, N.Y.

DISTANT LIVES

I found haunting parallels and differences between Yeniifer Alvarez's pregnancy, as described in Stephania Taladrid's piece, and my own ("The Life of the Mother," January 15th). Like Yeni, I became pregnant with my first child just months before Roe v. Wade was overturned, and was hospitalized, at twenty-two weeks, with dangerously high blood pressure. But, unlike Yeni, I had health insurance and resided in a state that had abortion protections post-Roe. My doctors presented me with all the available options, including abortion, and my baby was removed from my body at twenty-five weeks, before either of us was seriously harmed. Although my son spent some time in the NICU learning how to breathe on his own, he had the advantages of expert medical care and equipment—a startling contrast to the old baby warmer in which Yeni's daughter, Selene, was laid.

Sadly, with the elimination of federal abortion protections, the lives and long-term health of pregnant women now depend on which state they live in, and whether they have the resources to cross state lines to access abortion services if potentially fatal issues arise.

Chelsea Bobo
Alameda, Calif.

•

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GOINGS ON

JANUARY 31 – FEBRUARY 6, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

The Film Forum series **"Sapph-O-Rama"** (Feb. 2-13) shows that lesbian cinema extends far beyond a niche category. The thirty films on view range from the silent era (with "Salomé," from 1922, starring Alla Nazimova) to recent releases, and include international selections—among them Chantal Akerman's "Je Tu Il Elle" and Pedro Almodóvar's "Dark Habits." Hollywood's golden age is represented by such classics as "Johnny Guitar" and "Calamity Jane," and American independent cinema provides many notable entries, such as Jamie Babbit's "But I'm a Cheerleader" (pictured), a serious comedy depicting the horrors of conversion therapy. Lizzie Borden's daringly original political and musical fantasy, "Born in Flames," from 1983—set in downtown Manhattan in the wake of an imagined socialist revolution—is centered on a group of feminist vigilantes and combines the cultural energy of New Wave rock with the radical effort to internationalize the revolution.—*Richard Brody*

COURTESY LIONSGATE

ABOUT TOWN

HIP-HOP | The alt-rap trio **grouptherapy.** was founded on a simple premise: child actors—Tyrel J. Williams (TJOnline), Jadagrace, and Coy Stewart (SWIM)—connected by similar upbringings in the entertainment industry, finding a collective outlet in making probing, left-field songs. This past June, the crew self-released its début album, "I Was Mature for My Age, But I Was Still a Child," which is more than just impressively self-aware—its genre-bending tracks showcase its performers' considerable range. "I got more bruises than bones / And ever since seven was definitely grown," SWIM raps on "Help Pt. 2," grappling with the burdens of preternatural gifts, lamenting the innocence lost in their cultivation.—*Sheldon Pearce (Baby's All Right; Feb. 2.)*

OFF BROADWAY | The Irish Rep's current season of Brian Friel works takes a step backward from last year's masterful revival of his "Translations" with **"Aristocrats,"** a poignant family drama from 1979. Three grown sisters and a brother in nineteen-seventies Ballybeg, Ireland, nurse sore and sometimes deluded hearts, as their leaky estate and irascible father threaten their fragile equilibrium. The drama's gauge for class divisions and for hopes in decline is still beautifully calibrated, but moments of unintended awkwardness among the company, one or two of whom seem genuinely uncomfortable, sometimes throw it off. Charlotte Moore's production, haunted by an offstage sister's obsessive Chopin playing, certainly strives for Friel's melancholy mood, but unusually at the Irish Rep the postage-stamp stage seems to cramp an already limited horizon.—*Helen Shaw (Irish Rep; through March 3.)*

ART | The career of **Sonia Gechtoff,** who died in 2018, at the age of ninety-one, was full of risky experiments and reinventions. A prominent San Francisco Abstract Expressionist, she moved to New York in 1958 and proceeded to be unclassifiable for the next six decades. Many of the paintings in "Objects on the New Landscape," a spottily dazzling two-gallery exhibition, were completed in the eighties and have the bright crispness of nineteenth-century Japanese prints (Hiroshige was a key influence), with a feathery texture that comes from graphite shading. A few are a notch too facile, but the best, like "Moon Rising" (1989), have a fizzing glow that insinuates itself in the memory and refuses to leave.—*Jackson Arn (Andrew Kreps through Feb. 10; Bortolami through March 2.)*

DANCE | **Music from the Sole** is a percussive dance company that flags its values in its name. Led by the Brazilian-born tap dancer Leonardo Sandoval and the composer-bassist Gregory Richardson, the troupe puts music first, whether drummed in tap shoes, sneakers, or bare feet, slapped on skin, or played on instruments. That music is Afro-diasporic—now samba, now house—and the vibe, like that of Dorrance Dance, the company in which Sandoval and Richardson first came together, matches high skill with friendliness. The group's latest show, "I Didn't Come to Stay," is like a backyard party.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 30-Feb. 4.)*

ROCK OPERA | When Taylor Mac presented his "24-Decade History of Popular Music"—a queer-history-revue-cum-variety show—in a twenty-four-hour marathon in October, 2016, the arc of history still looked like it might be bending in the right direction. Seven years later, Mac is back, with **"Bark of Millions,"** a shorter—and spikier—rock opera whose fifty-five songs, one for each year since Stonewall, aim to make the audience a little queerer. Like its predecessor (available in truncated form on Max), the show is written by Mac, with music by Matt Ray; Machine Dazzle costumes an ensemble of polychrome hierophants and historicizing harlequins. Political theatre can be a pleasure.—*Fergus McIntosh (BAM Harvey Theatre; Feb. 5-10.)*

MOVIES | A classic American independent film, David Schickele's **"Bushman,"** from 1971, is emerging from undue obscurity thanks to a new restoration. It's a freewheeling blend of fiction and documentary that's overtaken by off-camera realities. The protagonist, Gabriel (Paul Eyam Nzie Okpokam), is a Nigerian student activist who, fleeing civil war and repression, arrives in San Francisco in 1968 and enrolls in grad school. He dates Alma (Elaine Featherstone), a Black woman who acquaints him with a Black American perspective; in documentary-style interviews, Gabriel contrasts his life in Nigeria with his view of the United States. But, at a protest, Okpokam gets into trouble that interferes with the shoot—and Schickele incorporates the actor's experience into the film. Knowing humor gives way to bitter candor about political troubles of the time—many of which are still unredressed.—*Richard Brody (Opening Feb. 2 at IFC Center.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Naks
201 First Ave.

Soon after settling in for the *kamayan* meal at Naks, a new restaurant in the East Village, you'll be asked to get back up again. *Kamayan* (Tagalog for "by hand") is a Filipino feast eaten without utensils; with this in mind, diners are led to a sink installed in the room before commencing. Many of the city's Filipino restaurants offer *kamayan*, generally as a large-format sampler; at Naks, under the direction of the chef and co-owner Eric Valdez, it's a coursed-out tasting menu that aims to offer a gastronomic tour of the Philippines—its melding of native foodways with centuries of Spanish, Chinese, Indian, and American occupation—framed by Valdez's own biography and memories.

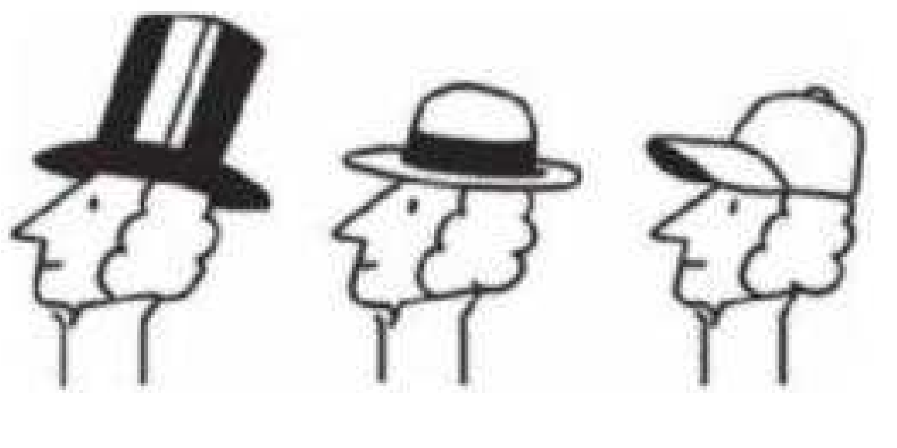
The dishes were consistently delightful. Tiny bites of *kinilaw na bat* (sea-cucumber ceviche) glowed neon-bright with calamansi and ginger. A scallop rested on its shell, draped in an ultra-rich emulsion of margarine and creamy Eden cheese. The climax was a gorgeous mess of *pancit batil patong* (egg noodles with beef and liver), tossed with a yolky fried egg, followed by a glistening hunk of *lechon liempo* (roasted pork belly). But the joyousness and wit of the food was at odds with the pageantry surrounding it. Valdez is hard at work in the kitchen, and Naks's *kamayan* is a collective experience—everyone in the room is served the same course at the same time—so each dish is announced by one of a rotating Greek chorus of servers, who recount the absent chef's personal stories, often in stilted or superficial ways.

A far chiller experience is available in Naks's front room, where closely packed tables and an à-la-carte menu lend the proceedings a freewheeling friendliness. "Oh, my God, that looks fantastic," a woman at the next table said, leaning toward my wenge-dark fried duck. Is anything better than fried duck? Naks nails its crispy-melty ecstasy perfectly. Then she asked, "Did you get the soup?"

Of course I did. Soup No. 5, titillating and already infamous, features a broth heavily spiced with *sibot* (a smoky, tangy blend of Chinese herbs), in which float bits of bull testicles and penis. Traditionally, it's a hangover cure, perhaps owing to the virility of its star ingredients: one is spongy, the other chewy; I won't spoil which is which. The menu also includes grilled pork-jowl skewers, with glossy, sweet barbecue sauce made with banana ketchup, and little popcorn nuggets of dark-meat chicken with a sauce so fiery-hot, so puckery with fish sauce, that it made me feel wildly alive. Filipino food is known for its forceful flavors, which land with all the subtlety of a haymaker, but Valdez knows the power of pointed restraint. "This is so *good*," the woman next to me cried, about an egg-yolk-and-caramel flan, wobbly and divine. "This is *so* good!" *(Kamayan $135; à la carte $15-47.)*

—Helen Rosner

PHOTOGRAPH BY HEAMI LEE FOR THE NEW YORKER;
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN (TOP); MIN HEO (BOTTOM)



PICK THREE

The staff writer Molly Fischer on her favorite food newsletters.

1. A dinnertime rut feels especially grim in midwinter, and recently I've been leaning on food newsletters for inspiration. **The Green Spoon,** a guide to feeding babies and toddlers alongside their parents, is written by the friends and food obsessives Greta Caruso and Fanny Singer. Singer also happens to be Alice Waters's daughter, and though nepo babies might arouse suspicion in many contexts, having an expert parent seems like a fair qualification in this particular realm: Where better to learn home cooking than at home? Roast kabocha squash à la the Green Spoon is the simplest thing I've made that my ten-month-old likes as much as I do.

2. Ali Slagle is a recipe developer—her 2022 cookbook, "I Dream of Dinner (so you don't have to)," has become one of my kitchen stalwarts—and last year she started a newsletter called **40 Ingredients Forever.** The idea is that most of what she makes draws on the same handful of go-to supplies, mixed and matched for maximally convenient cooking. Just reading her list of forty favorites (fennel, ground lamb, white beans, sherry vinegar) gives me the feeling of serenely organized abundance that one might get from a capsule-wardrobe shopping guide.

3. **The Best Bit** comes from the chef Clare de Boer, one of the co-owners of King, in Manhattan, and the founder of Stissing House, upstate. She's a restaurant star, but her newsletter avoids the pitfall of restaurant cookbooks: this is unfussy food that's perfectly comfortable at home. Last August, she sent out a recipe for Sungold-tomato soup—tangy, bright, and simultaneously summery and autumnal—that I'm still thinking about now.

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THE NEW YORKER

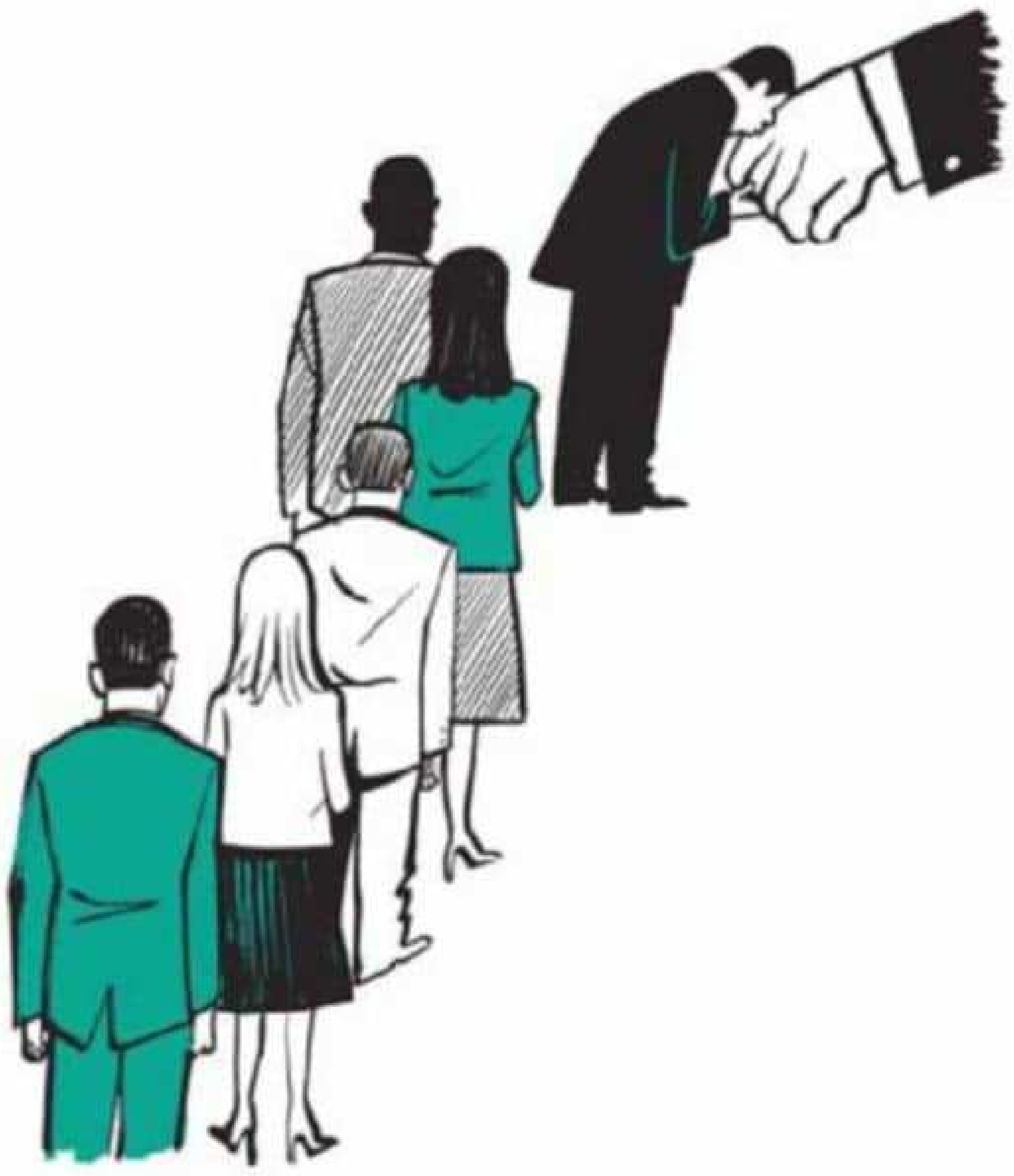
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
VEEPSTAKES

"We need a President who will restore law and order!," Senator Tim Scott, of South Carolina, bellowed from a stage in Concord, New Hampshire, ahead of that state's primary last week. "We *neeeed* Donald Trump!" And Donald Trump, barring a major plot twist, will soon need a running mate. Scott, the only Black Republican in the Senate, and until recently a candidate for the Republican nomination himself, appears to be well aware of that prospect. He's not the only one. An unseemly crowd of would-be Veeps has been campaigning in Trump's wake, generating a phantasmagoria of MAGA abasement—rich in ambition, short on shame.

There was a brief time when it seemed possible that prominent Republicans would recoil from the idea of being Trump's sidekick. The last person to hold the job, Mike Pence, was threatened with lynching after he refused to go along with his boss's plan for a coup. But the proliferating lists of serious aspirants include governors, senators, and members of the House, in addition to various MAGA hangers-on. (Donald Trump, Jr., told Newsmax that Tucker Carlson would "certainly be a contender.") Elise Stefanik, the chair of the House Republican Conference, "would be honored," she said, "to serve in a future Trump Administration in any capacity," which is just a fancy paraphrase of the declaration by Kari Lake, an Arizona Senate candidate, that she would "crawl over broken glass" for the former President. By the A.P.'s count, thirty current senators have endorsed Trump. The very fact that there is a competition confirms how Trumpist the G.O.P. has become.

In other words, while the veepstakes is a regular feature of the American Presidential process, this round has some decidedly irregular features. For one thing, it is coming quite early; Super Tuesday is still a month away. In late January, Trump stoked the Veep talk by informing Fox News's Bret Baier that there was someone "that I think I like" and that there was "a twenty-five-percent chance" he'd choose that person. He seems to relish both the spectacle and the indirect acknowledgment that he has the nomination tied up. For related reasons, the unwillingness of Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor, to drop out of the race after coming in second in New Hampshire seems to enrage him. Last week, he announced on Truth Social that anyone who gave "Birdbrain" Haley money would be "permanently barred from the MAGA camp." And veepstakes is one of the games they play at that camp.



There is another, even stranger, aspect of this campaign. Trump is under criminal indictment in four jurisdictions; separately, the Supreme Court is hearing oral arguments on February 8th about his eligibility to be on the ballot. These cases raise profound questions about the role of the potential Vice-President. (Will Trump's V.P. pick be the presumptive alternative nominee? If convicted but still elected, could Trump call a Vice-President Marjorie Taylor Greene from prison to order an air strike on a foreign country?) The paradox is that, while the level of Republican unity seems, at this stage, unusually high, so is the chance that the ticket will fall apart. Adding to the uncertainty, for both parties: Trump is seventy-seven and Joe Biden is eighty-one. When Haley was asked last week why she, too—despite it all—still planned to endorse Trump if he gets the nomination, she said, "Because I don't ever want to see a President Kamala Harris."

Haley also said, days before the primary, "I don't want to be anybody's Vice-President. That is off the table." There is, no doubt, a mix of pragmatism and principle in her position. She's unlikely to be chosen, anyway. (In New Hampshire, when Trump said that Scott "must really hate" Haley, Scott said, "I just love you!") Similarly, Ron DeSantis would not be a practical running mate, because both he and Trump are Florida residents; owing to a quirk of the Constitution, Florida's electors could not vote for both of them. DeSantis, like Haley, might have

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

his eye on 2028, instead. Representative Byron Donalds also has a Florida problem, but when asked if he would take the spot he said, "I mean, who wouldn't?"

For the remaining contenders, Politico observed that the challenge is demonstrating "their fealty to Trump" without "overdoing it." It's not clear where Trump places the overdoing-it bar. Pence questioned the outcome of the 2020 election, and that wasn't good enough. Is it necessary to suggest, as Senator J. D. Vance, of Ohio—another name mooted by Don, Jr.—did in New Hampshire, that the truth about January 6th has been hidden from the American people? Vance has also referred to Trump's legal issues as "sham indictments to protect a failed President." The veepstakes may devolve into a scramble to impugn both the legal and the electoral systems. Stefanik, making her bid, called people criminally charged for their actions on January 6th "hostages." She is regarded as a top prospect: at a joint appearance in New Hampshire, Trump praised her both for having attacked Harvard in a recent congressional hearing and for having gone to Harvard herself.

The election, judging from polls, will be close, and it's possible that a V.P. pick could make a difference with, say, suburban women or Black men. And it's easy to get caught up in questions of style. What plays best: the relative subtlety of Arkansas's governor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who has responded to her inclusion on many lists by saying, "I absolutely love the job I have"; the posturing coyness of Representative Nancy Mace, telling Charlamagne tha God that she finds the idea "intriguing"; or the raw enthusiasm of Governor Kristi Noem, of South Dakota, who said that she'd be Trump's Veep "in a heartbeat"? (North Dakota's governor, Doug Burgum, is in the mix, too.) Where the choice almost certainly won't make a difference is in restraining Trump's worst impulses.

Even the more absurd moments in Trump's veepstakes are imbued with disquieting undertones. During his New Hampshire victory speech, for example, Trump asked Vivek Ramaswamy, the conspiracy-prattling businessman and former Presidential candidate, to step forward, in a tone that suggested he saw him less as a campaign surrogate than as a windup toy: "One minute or less! Go do it, Vivek!" Ramaswamy obliged with some rapid-fire words about Ukrainian kleptocrats and Haley putting "America last" and added, of her supporters, "The only thing they're rooting for is an ugly thing that we don't want to see happen." Which ugly thing? It wasn't clear. Trump, though, looked pleased. Minutes later, he told Scott, who was also onstage, to come up and take his shot.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

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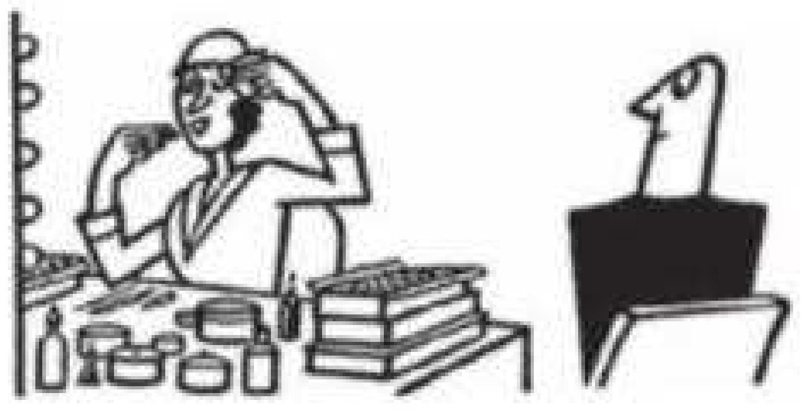
LATE BLOOMER

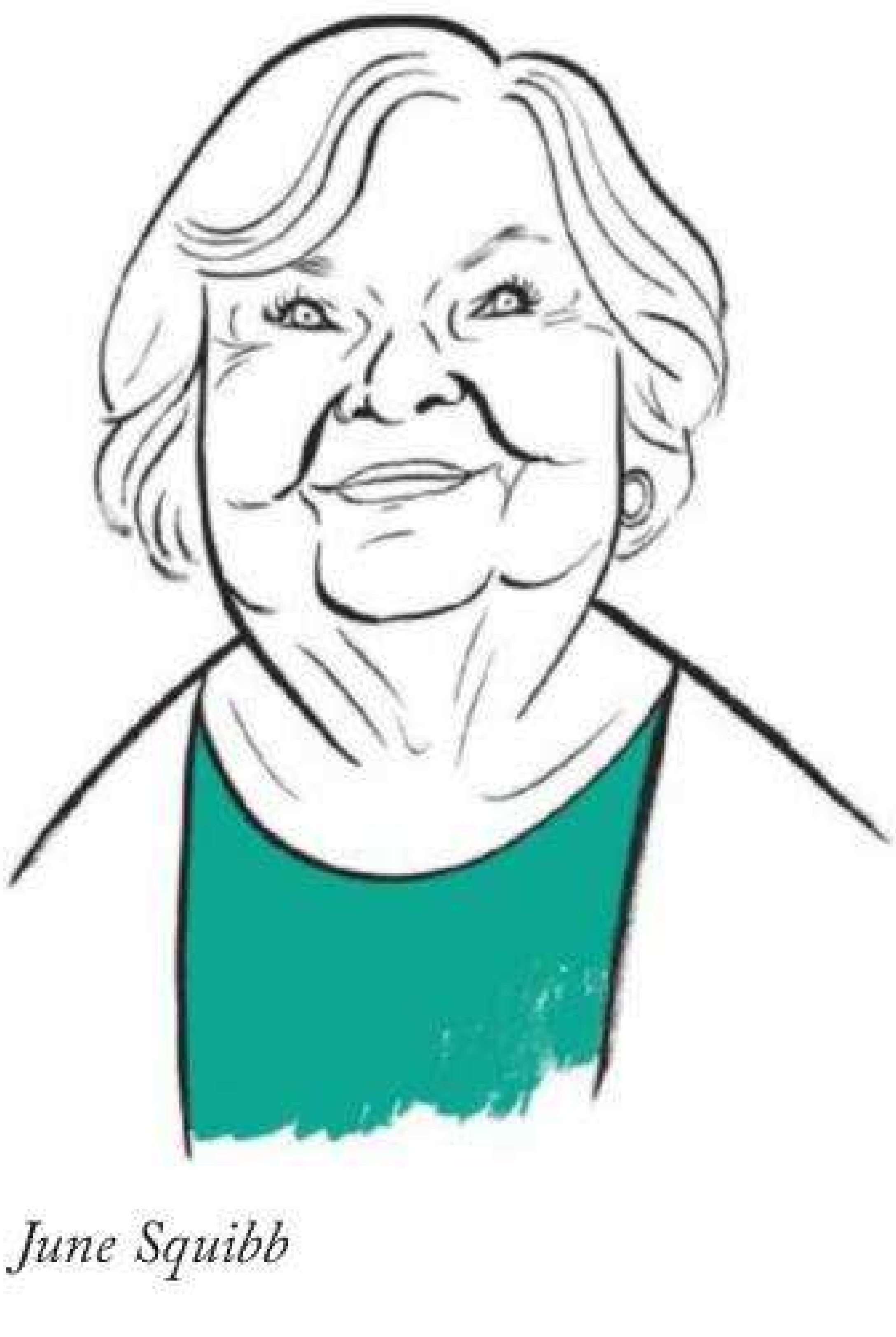


The other Friday, in a Hawaiian-themed apartment complex in the San Fernando Valley (burbling mini-waterfall, tiki-hut-style patrol booth), June Squibb was puttering around her cozy two-bedroom. The actress, who is ninety-four, has lived in the complex since the early two-thousands. "They brought me out to Los Angeles from New York for the première of 'About Schmidt,'" she said, referring to the 2002 Alexander Payne film, in which she played Jack Nicholson's wife. "And then my agent got me 'ER,' and I just kept getting work." Squibb's robust orange tabby, Billy Bob, wandered by and rubbed against her shin. Her other feline, Mr. Rose, was dozing in the back of the apartment. "We have twenty-three spots for the cats around the house," Kelly Sweeney, Squibb's longtime assistant, said. "Little beds and stuff."

In sporty black sneakers, with her hair in a bob, Squibb radiated cheerful capability. She grew up in a small town in Illinois, the daughter of an insurance salesman and a piano teacher. She knew early on that she wanted to be in show business—"since I came out of the womb," she said. At nineteen, she joined the Cleveland Play House to perform in musicals. "A lot of people came out of there, like Dom," she said, gesturing at an Al Hirschfeld caricature of the late Dom DeLuise, her good friend, which was framed on the wall. She ended up in New York, where she appeared on Broadway and off. "I was a comedienne," she said.

Then, in the nineteen-sixties, she met the director and acting teacher Charles Kakatsakis, who became her second husband and the father of her son, Harry. "He convinced me that I could be a really fine actress," she said. Though she was already in her late thirties, Squibb began taking classes with him. It wasn't easy. "All the kids were younger than me, and they knew me as Charlie's wife," she said. "I would scream and cry, but he'd say, 'You're doing it!,' and, boy, he got me to do it!" She finally began working in film when she was around sixty—a run that has included an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress, in 2014, at the age of eighty-four, for her role as a salty matriarch in another Payne movie, "Nebraska." (Kakatsakis passed away in 1999.)

It was lunchtime, so Squibb and Sweeney ventured out to a local Japanese restaurant to meet with Zoë Worth, a ponytailed producer in her thirties. Squibb had befriended Worth while making "Thelma," an action comedy that Worth produced, in which Squibb plays the titular character: a grandmother who gets taken in by a phone scam to the tune of ten thousand dollars and decides to go on a quest to recover the money, with the help of a widower played by Richard Roundtree. The movie was the



June Squibb

début feature from the director Josh Margolin, who based the character on his own grandmother (also named Thelma, and, at a hundred and three, still with us). Margolin had wanted Squibb for the role, but had been unsure how to get the script to her, until a friend of his sister's, the actress Beanie Feldstein, intervened.

"Beanie and I had done 'The Humans' together," Squibb said, referring to the 2021 drama. She took a bite of pork gyoza. "We became close friends. We maintained a text tree or whatever you call it."

Sweeney broke in: "And then we went to her wedding"—Feldstein married her girlfriend, Bonnie-Chance Roberts, in 2023—"and everybody Beanie's age knew about it. They said, 'You're going to be *Thelma!*' "

"I haven't met the real Thelma, but we both like cop shows, so I told Josh to tell her which cop shows are my favorite, and she told him to tell me hers," Squibb said. " 'FBI' on Tuesdays, on CBS, is the best. I'd love to be on it, more than anything."

"What's the holdup?" Worth asked. "When we get home, let's start IMDbing, let's send out a couple of notes."

"June likes these shows because she likes justice," Sweeney said. "She's like Thelma."

"I related to the character immediately," Squibb said. "Her strength, and her decision—'I'm going to get the money back.' And she does it!"

Sweeney pulled out her phone and zoomed in on a black-and-white picture of Squibb as a child, wearing boots and a dress. "I was awful," Squibb said, laughing. "I would stand in my yard and I'd say, 'Anybody who comes in here, I'm going to beat them up!' "

She sighed. "When you get to be my age, you lose a lot of friends," she said. Roundtree had died in October, at eighty-one. "That hurt a lot," she said. "He showed nothing when we were working—he was strong. But they told us it was a very fast-acting cancer."

Roundtree's five children were going to come to Sundance, where "Thelma" was premièring. Squibb needed something to wear for the big event. Grabbing her cane, she got up to head to the clothing shop next door. "Anything bright red would be good," she said.

—*Naomi Fry*

THE BOARDS
INTERPRETER

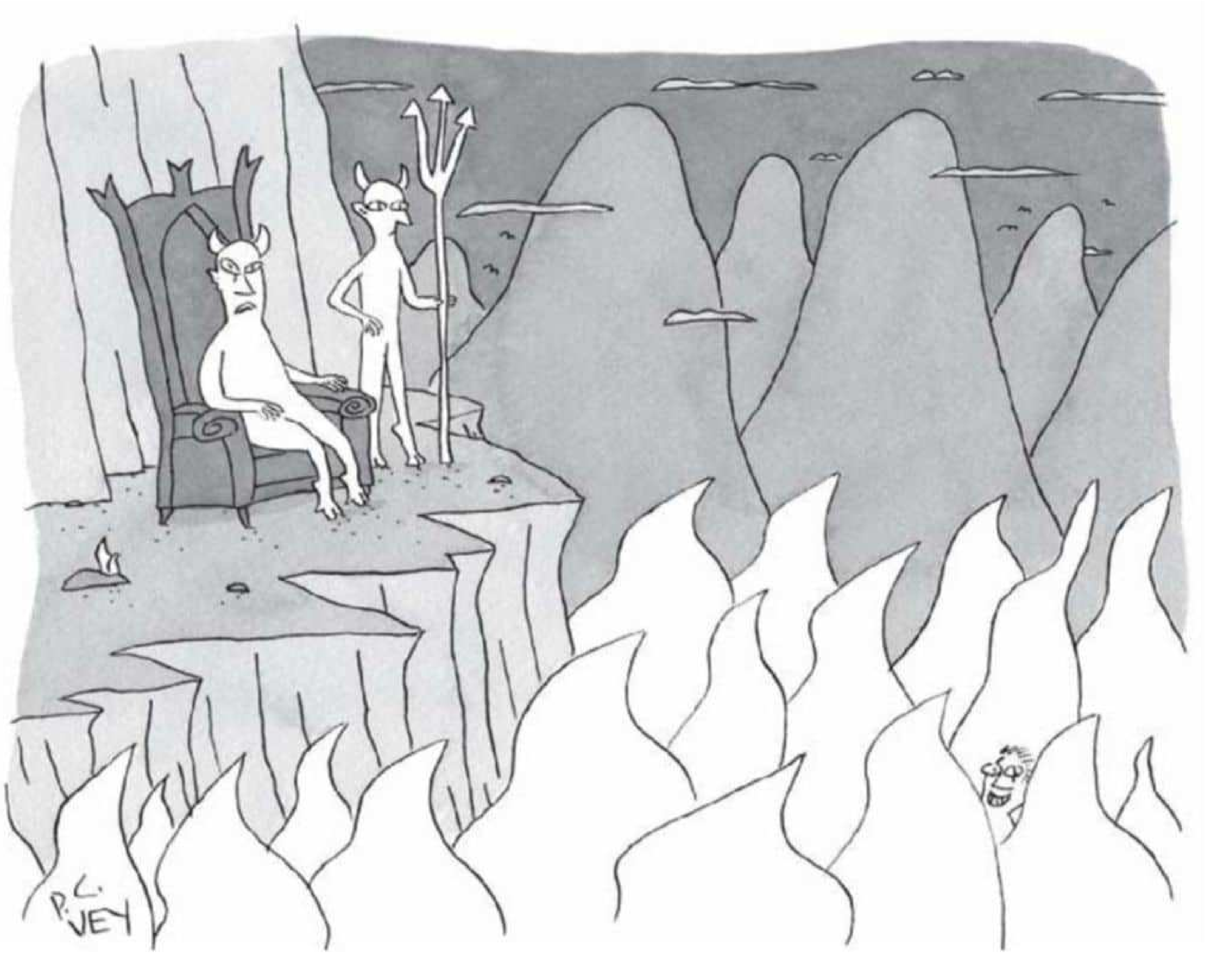
The artist Suzanne Bocanegra has many stories to tell, and not just her own: her installations, sculptural assemblages, and performance pieces often unpack other artists' work (she once sewed tiny cotton replicas of all the aprons from Jean-François Millet's peasant paintings) or feature appearances by fellow-creators. She's particularly interested in women working—and women in trouble. For her video piece "Valley," from 2018, she meticulously reproduced a four-minute clip of Judy Garland's 1967 wardrobe test for "Valley of the Dolls" by filming eight artistic titans, such as Carrie Mae Weems, reënacting the snippet.

Since 2010, Bocanegra has been making a suite of "Artist Lectures" (there are four so far)—droll multimedia talks, presented onstage before an audience, ranging across her life and art history, sometimes peering into eccentric corners of Americana. In each, Bocanegra sits to one side of the stage, at a barely lit table, as an actor does the speaking for her. Bocanegra is actually murmuring the text into a microphone, and the actor instantly transmits it, repeating what she hears via an in-ear receiver. "Hello, I'm Suzanne Bocanegra," each piece begins, though the person we hear might be Lili Taylor or Frances McDormand. Bocanegra is presenting all four at N.Y.U.'s Skirball Center in occasional one-night-only performances. This week, the Texas-born Suzanne (quiet, smiling, feline) will be played by the Oscar-nominated Ethiopian Irish actress Ruth Negga (a coil of stunning expressive energy).

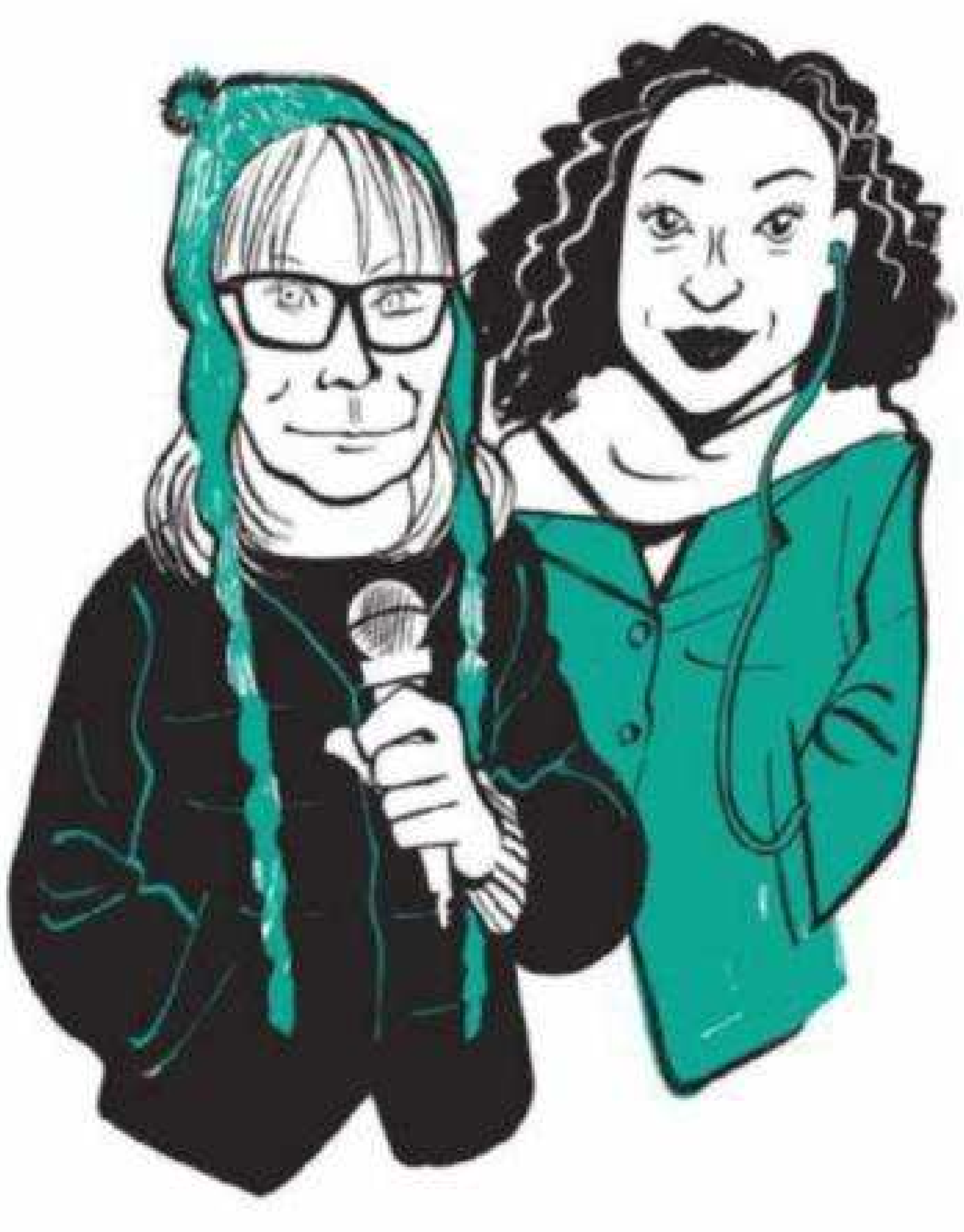
"It's terrifying!" Negga said, in a room in the basement of Skirball, as she tried out the earpiece for the first time. "I feel a bit awkward—like, what's a baby deer called? *Bambi*." It was the first rehearsal for Bocanegra's "Bodycast" show: six days before the performance, and the first time that Negga and Bocanegra had ever met in person. They bonded over being raised Catholic. Bocanegra wore a severe black skirt that was nun-adjacent. Negga had on gray sweatpants and a stripy sweater.

The two Suzannes and their director, Paul Lazar—who played Duncan to Negga's Lady Macbeth on Broadway in 2022—talked about how to use the earbud to create the sense of being an interpreter, rather than an inflectionless conduit.

"It's like, here's the line, and say it like you're saying it yourself," Lazar said. He



"Why do we always get the sickos?"



Suzanne Bocanegra and Ruth Negga

was familiar with the technique from playing Suzanne in another lecture, "When a Priest Marries a Witch." (The last work in the series, "Honor," will be performed by Lili Taylor on April 8th.)

"Bodycast"'s core narrative is about the several years Bocanegra spent, as a teen-ager, in a neck-to-hip spine-correcting cast; her meditation on that plaster exo-structure branches into a wide-ranging discussion on the misleading whiteness of classical sculpture, on artists like Frida Kahlo and Marie Taglioni (the first ballerina famous for dancing en pointe), and on the way women disregard their own discomfort.

"I did ballet," Negga said. "I just didn't enjoy it. It wasn't really for my body type. I was brown and round in a sea of white matchsticks. I didn't even make it to the tutu stage."

When Bocanegra was growing up, in Houston, she was obsessed with her school's dance squad, the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cadets. "Here I am in Texas, in a body cast, and it's a hundred degrees all the time, and, damn it, I was going to join the drill team, because I grew up with this idea that it's an important part of your life as a girl," Bocanegra said. "It was hellish, but I did it."

"Do you say that?" Lazar asked, hoping she'd put it in the show. "I think it's important."

Negga, curled up on a chair beside Bocanegra, imitated her gestures, clenching both fists and bringing her elbows in sharply. "I don't know if you realize you did that just now," she said, flexing her forearms again. "You're, like, 'By God, I'm going to win this war!' And, for a thirteen-year-old, that's your war."

Bocanegra last presented "Bodycast" in 2019, and she was still adjusting the text and the accompanying slides and videos, as she often does. She wanted to add a sequence from "Valley," and she told the group the story about Garland's screen test: "She's obviously nervous. They'll say, 'Can you turn around, Judy?,' and she'll go, 'Without a cigarette and blindfold?'"

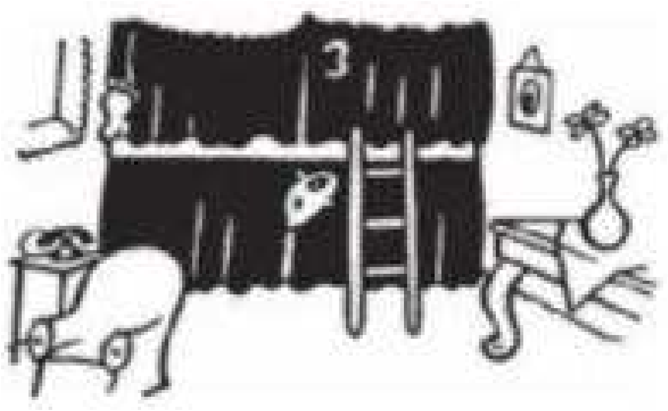
"I know why that is," Negga said. She was all too familiar with wardrobe tests. "They can rob you of your"—she laughed—"*humanity*."

Negga turned the conversation to Kahlo, who, at eighteen, had a horrible accident that left her in a full-torso cast for life. "Women's bodies aren't talked about," Negga said. "In her diary, she says something like 'I lost my virginity to a metal pole.' You think you know about this famous artist, but they don't talk about the pole going through her vagina!" Bocanegra was scribbling notes to herself on the script. The pole seemed to remind her of the rod fused to her own spine.

Negga, an art fanatic, knows a lot about Weems, and Taglioni, and Kahlo, including Kahlo's tumultuous relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera. "I think her sister had an affair with Diego, and she was, like, 'I feel murdered,'" Negga said. She shook her head. "Diego—what a dickhead."

—*Helen Shaw*

NEW ROOMMATES DEPT.
GHOSTS IN THE BUILDING



New York City's history is full of doppelgängers, look-alikes, and repetitions. Is there any experience as universal as moving here from a small town, working a crappy job, and spending half your keep to rent a shoebox apartment that you share with a roommate? Take, for instance, the story of a waiter named Joseph Moore. He moved to the city from Belvedere, New Jersey. He wasn't on StreetEasy—this was 1857. The best he could afford was a two-hundred-and-seventy-square-foot apartment he shared with four others. Moore is the subject of the Tenement Museum's latest exhibition, "A Union of Hope." On a recent Sunday, two historians who consulted on the project, Tyler Anbinder and Leslie Harris, met with Annie Polland, the museum's president, to take a tour.

The three joined up on Orchard Street, outside one of the walkups that house the museum. Since its founding, in 1988, the museum has focussed on its buildings' former residents. Moore is the first subject who lived elsewhere. Polland, who has a cascade of graying hair, explained why he was chosen for the honor. Reason one: in 2008, an exhibition about Irish inhabitants featured a different Joseph Moore—another waiter. Attendees were given a page from an old city directory. It listed two Joseph Moores. "The visitors are, like, 'Well, wait, who's this other Joseph Moore?'" Polland said. "'Why does it say "col'd"? He lives on Laurens Street. Where is Laurens Street?' And so we looked into this." "Col'd" meant "colored"; Laurens Street is now West Broadway.

Reason two: in the eighties, a woman named Gina Manuel sent a letter to the museum's founders, asking them not to forget her Black ancestors. "Their spirits walk those halls and their bones lay in the earth there," she wrote. (She added, "Forgive typo's, on coffee break.") Recently, the museum looked into Manuel's ancestry. "We have her great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother living at Laurens Street," Polland said. "That was, like, 'Whoa,' because that's the same address as Joseph and his wife, Rachel!" Manuel's great-grandmother, Parthenia, overlapped with the Moores.

"You're making that up!" Anbinder, who is wiry, with an impish face, said.

"We did scream when we found that out," Polland said.

Harris, who has a short Afro of loose curls, said, "My woo-woo part is 'You've ignored us for too long. Now it's time.'"

The museum cobbled together details of Moore's life. Anbinder provided information about conditions in the tenement. Harris advised on Black life in the city. Moore, it turned out, had come to Manhattan at the age of twenty, after another free Black man in Belvedere was apprehended by a "slave catcher." Moore likely made eighteen dollars a month as a waiter, and spent seven on rent. "Waiters were virtually the worst-paid men in New York," Anbinder said. "Chimney sweep—that would be even worse."

The procession continued to the top-floor re-creation of Moore's cramped two-room quarters. Joseph, Rachel, and her stepdaughter (Rachel had previously been married to the girl's father, who escaped slavery and later died) lived with an Irish washerwoman named Rose and her son, Louis Munday, who is listed on census forms as "mulatto." The Moores all slept in the same bedroom; in the exhibition, a framed photo of Abraham Lincoln sat on the mantel. The kitchen could barely accommodate a metal washtub, a coal stove, and a dining table, spread with oysters and bread. "I have to share that the stovepipe is missing," Polland said. "There will be someone on the tour that would ask about that. Some people love stoves."

Anbinder was poking through the larder. "How did you choose a turkey carcass?" he asked.

"Do you really want to know?" Polland said.

In the Moores' time, most parts of the city were hostile to Black renters. Laurens Street was an exception. "The majority of white New Yorkers were really mad that the country was fighting a war to free slaves," Anbinder said.

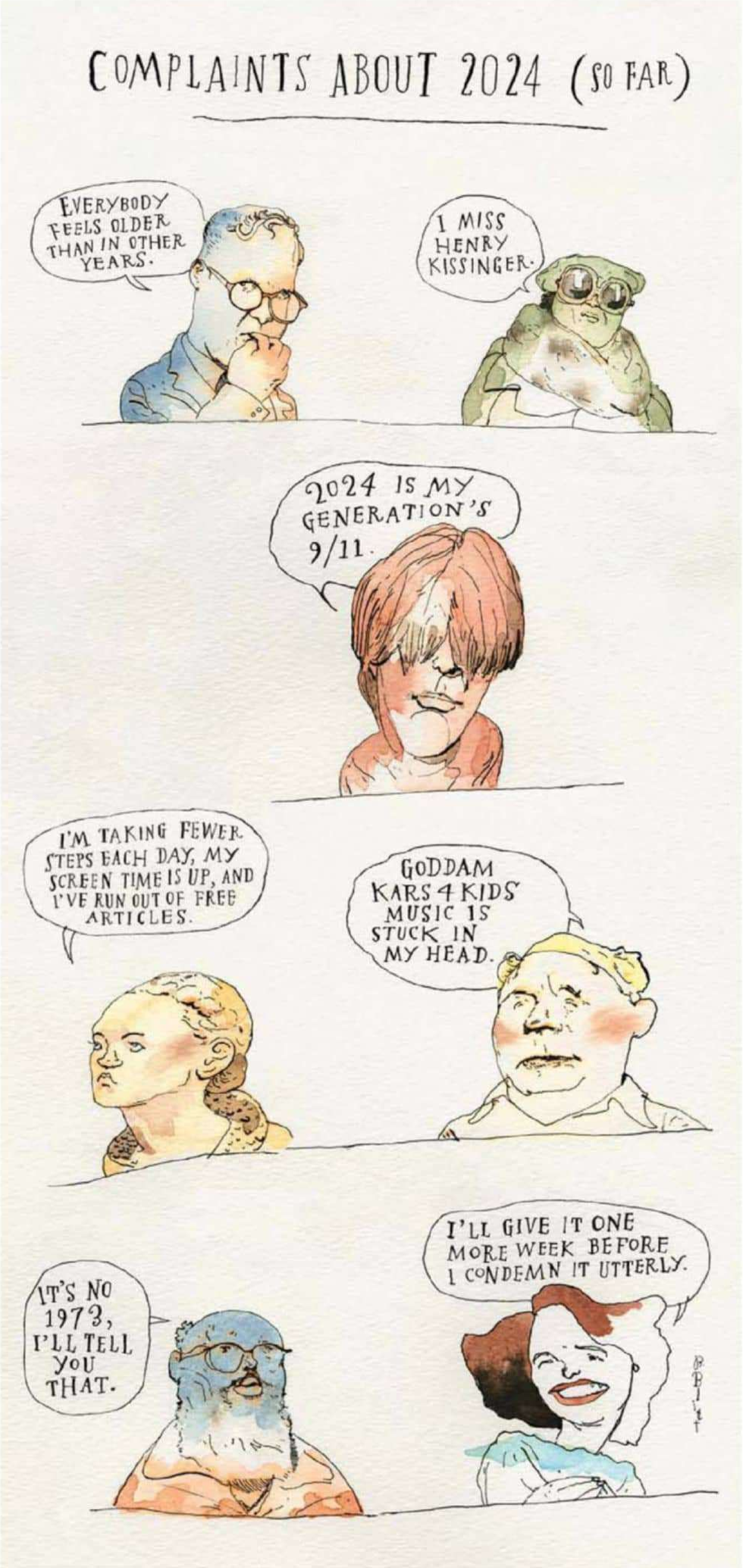
Harris explained, "There was a big discussion within the Black community about whether or not people should stay, not only in New York but if they should stay in the U.S."

In 1870, Laurens Street was widened, and the Moores and their neighbors were displaced. (The site of their tenement building eventually became the Soho Grand Hotel.) Afterward, the trail on Moore went cold for a decade. He resurfaced in Jersey City, where he was working as a coachman and had remarried. Rachel seems to have died; the museum has yet to find a death certificate.

The group headed to a basement saloon. "I, for the record, don't believe in ghosts," Polland said. "But the voices of people whose stories haven't been told did exist. And I think when you start to listen for them, and you start to look for them, and you start to become attuned to it, then you start to hear it."

—Ismail Ibrahim

SKETCHPAD BY BARRY BLITT


COMPLAINTS ABOUT 2024 (SO FAR)
EVERYBODY FEELS OLDER THAN IN OTHER YEARS.
I MISS HENRY KISSINGER.
2024 IS MY GENERATION'S 9/11.
I'M TAKING FEWER STEPS EACH DAY, MY SCREEN TIME IS UP, AND I'VE RUN OUT OF FREE ARTICLES.
GODDAM KARS 4 KIDS MUSIC IS STUCK IN MY HEAD.
IT'S NO 1973, I'LL TELL YOU THAT.
I'LL GIVE IT ONE MORE WEEK BEFORE I CONDEMN IT UTTERLY.

LETTER FROM VERMONT

A SLIPPERY SLOPE

How a rural ski resort became embroiled in an international fraud.

BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
PERMANENT RESIDENT

When the scheme became public, Vermont's governor said, "We all feel betrayed."

As the general manager of the Jay Peak ski resort, Bill Stenger rose most days around 6 A.M. and arrived at the slopes before seven. He'd check in with his head snowmaker and the ski-patrol staff, visit the two hotels on the property, and chat with the maintenance workers, the lift operators, the food-and-beverage manager, and the ski-school instructors—a kind of management through constant motion. Stenger is seventy-five, with white hair, wire-rimmed reading glasses, and a sturdy physique that makes him look built for fuzzy sweaters. He told me recently, of skiing, "I love the sport. It's a dynamic sport, and, if it's properly taught, it is life-changing." On April 13, 2016, he had finished his morning rounds and was drinking coffee with the head of the snow-grooming department when his assistant called. "You need to come over to the office right away," she said, sounding nervous. "Some folks from the S.E.C. are here."

Stenger shows an ability to cling to optimism even when the facts don't warrant it. He didn't panic at first. "For all I knew, they were coming to take a tour of the place," he told me. He drove down to the cluster of trailers that served as the resort's administrative hub and noticed five or six black S.U.V.s in the parking lot. Inside the office, his staff was standing around awkwardly. A lawyer named Jeffrey Schneider told Stenger that the Securities and Exchange Commission was seizing the resort from Stenger's business partner, Ariel Quiros. It was also seizing Burke Mountain, another ski hill owned by Quiros, an hour away. At that moment, Quiros's office in Miami was being raided by S.E.C. agents. Schneider handed Stenger an eighty-one-page document alleging that Stenger and Quiros had committed fraud.

Jay Peak sits at the northern end of Vermont, twenty minutes from the Canadian border, and has one of the heaviest snowfalls in the region. It was, for many years, an obscure hill known for deep powder and glade skiing, visited primarily by locals, Canadians, and hard-core enthusiasts. "You could look around at the guests and see people with a lot of duct tape on their equipment," Mark English, a real-estate agent in the area, told me. "Someone who was addicted to skiing, but didn't necessarily have a lot of money—that's who came to Jay Peak." The area was relatively poor, and jobs were scarce. But, in the early two-thousands, Stenger developed a scheme to expand the resort and create jobs. He raised money using the EB-5 visa program, which aimed to channel foreign investments into businesses that created jobs for Americans, especially in rural or economically depressed parts of the country. For five hundred thousand dollars (the amount has since risen to nine hundred thousand), foreign investors and their families became eligible for green cards, so long as that money succeeded in creating at least ten jobs. "On balance, it's a good program," Stephen Yale-Loehr, a law professor at Cornell, said, "in that projects that couldn't find traditional bank financing have been able to use EB-5 money to get their projects off the ground."

Stenger persuaded Quiros to back his plan to use EB-5 funding to transform the property into a four-season resort, with a golf clubhouse, an ice rink, an indoor water park with a retractable glass roof, and a wave pool. Quiros later bought Burke Mountain, and hoped to develop that property as well. At Stenger's urging, he had also acquired a plot in the town of Newport, where Stenger lived, with plans to build a vast biotech facility that would manufacture sophisticated medical products, including dialysis machines and artificial organs (such as portable heart-lung pumps and synthetic livers). They predicted that, all together, the projects could create about ten thousand new jobs. Stenger flew around the world, wooing foreign investors with the

ILLUSTRATION BY ÁLVARO BERNIS

promise of a green card. In total, he raised three hundred and fifty million dollars. "Had the plan I was working on been completed, it would have transformed this community forever," he said.

The S.E.C. accused Stenger and Quiros of perpetrating a "massive" fraud, misusing more than half the money raised. Quiros had allegedly funnelled much of it through a variety of shell companies, and back into his own pocket—pilfering fifty million dollars, for example, to pay his taxes and to buy a condominium in Trump Place, in Manhattan, among other things. Stenger was not accused of stealing money himself. But, according to the S.E.C., he had presented fraudulent job and revenue projections for the projects to encourage further investment, and then looked the other way as Quiros enriched himself. Peter Shumlin, Vermont's then governor, who had once described Stenger and Quiros as "miracle-makers," held a press conference at the statehouse, and said, "We all feel betrayed."

As Stenger read the document from Schneider, federal agents fanned out across the resort, and experts secured the computer systems. Jay Peak was handed over to a court-appointed "receiver," who would safeguard the property for investors while the case proceeded. The staff was instructed to continue in its duties as normal, and guests didn't seem to notice anything unusual. After Stenger finished reading the complaint, he stood up and slammed it on the table. "I don't know anything about this," he said, adding, "I need to call my wife." Schneider recalled that Stenger seemed shocked, and that his eyes started to water. Stenger, he told me, "was either very surprised by what he was reading, or he was acting very surprised by what he was reading."

Rural Vermont is not alone in its struggle to create jobs. Population density is an important factor in generating economic prosperity, putting more remote areas at a disadvantage. In the past fifty years, major metropolitan regions such as Austin and New York have benefitted from a virtuous cycle. The presence of educated workers attracts employers, and vice versa, creating diverse and well-paying jobs. In rural areas, and even in smaller cities such as Detroit and Buffalo, globalization has led key employers—auto or textile manufacturers, say—to leave, prompting more businesses to close, ushering in a downward spiral. In the late nineties and the two-thousands, for example, the influx of cheap furniture from Asia caused half the jobs to disappear from North Carolina's furniture-manufacturing industry. Robeson County, in the south of the state, once hosted thriving factories; the poverty rate there is now more than twice the national average. Throughout the country, the widening wealth gap between rich city dwellers and everyone else has created, in a sense, two parallel societies, helping to fuel political polarization. During the last Presidential election, Joe Biden won fewer than five hundred counties, but, according to one estimate, they together represented about seventy per cent of America's economic activity; Donald Trump won five times as many counties, but they represented only about thirty per cent of the nation's economic activity.

Once an area is in decline, the trajectory is hard to change. Arthur Woolf, a retired economics professor at the University of Vermont, pointed to Hardwick, a town of three thousand people in central Vermont, which fostered an artisanal-food-based economy that local leaders hoped would bring business to the area. A premier cheese producer, Jasper Hill Farm, is there, and the surrounding area hosts several fancy breweries, an organic-vegetable purveyor called Pete's Greens, and several farm-to-table restaurants. One local wrote a book called "The Town That Food Saved," which described how the model could be replicated elsewhere. But five years ago Woolf researched the claims of Hardwick's boosters, and found that the effort hadn't made a substantial difference to local employment in the previous fifteen years. "These are long-term structural factors that are really hard to reverse," he told me.

The idea behind the EB-5 program was that visa-seeking foreigners might be more willing to pour money into low-income areas than domestic investors. After the program was signed into law, in 1990, ten thousand green cards were set aside each year for people willing to invest. Doug Bereuter, then a Republican congressman, framed the law as a violation of American values, noting that he was saddened to learn that American citizenship was "for sale to the highest bidder." But the arrangement also had its fans. "The EB-5 program, in a nutshell, is a job-creation program," Matt Gordon, who runs the E3 Investment Group, which advises foreign investors, told me. "You have wonderful people who are immigrating to America, and they're investing their capital with U.S. entrepreneurs."

In the first decades of the program, a tiny fraction of the visas were used. But, over the years, a few changes made it more attractive. Congress allowed for pooled investments—the combining of funds to finance larger, potentially more lucrative developments. It also made the job-creation requirement more flexible: a foreign investor could now claim that jobs were created "indirectly" because of the money. After the 2008 financial crisis, banks and other institutions pulled back on their lending, leaving entrepreneurs desperate for cash. Those familiar with the EB-5 program saw this as an opportunity. An army of middlemen—legal advisers and brokers—began scouting for projects in need of funding, recruiting foreign investors, and, when the deals went through, earning finders' fees amounting to tens of thousands of dollars per investor on a given project. Initially, some of these middlemen were former federal immigration officials. Harold Ezell, a former commissioner for the Immigration and Naturalization Service who became an immigration consultant, told the *Times*, "We've done a great job with boat people, and I think that a few yacht people are not going to hurt America."

Soon, brokers were holding meetings for investors at fancy hotels around the world. "People like to have a second passport," Gordon told me. China has been the largest source of investors, and, recently, Gordon has noted an increase in demand. When I asked why, he said, without hesitating, "Oh, fear," and noted that China's President, Xi Jinping, has, in the past decade, been "at war with the wealthy class, and people are genuinely afraid." EB-5 funding has supported worthy projects. In rural West Virginia and Pennsylvania, it helped create two opioid-addiction treatment centers. A development at the Sugarbush ski resort, in Warren, Vermont, ran out of conventional funding in 2008, but was completed with

EB-5 funding, saving an estimated eight hundred and sixty jobs. "We paid back the investors in about a decade," Sugarbush's former owner told me.

Over time, though, people began to put the program to more creative uses. In 2015, the developers behind Manhattan's Hudson Yards raised at least $1.2 billion in EB-5 financing for a project that included a luxury shopping mall, condos, and an office tower. It was the most expensive real-estate development in U.S. history. The *Times* described it as a "vast neoliberal Zion." In order to qualify for the most favorable tier of EB-5 financing, available only to areas with high unemployment, New York's economic-development agency hired an economist to create a map with a string of census tracts that awkwardly stretched to include Central Park as well as a cluster of housing projects at the northern end of the city. "They called it 'the Snake,'" Michael Gibson, an EB-5 investment adviser, told me. "The minute they figured out they could do this census-tract manipulation—really gerrymandering—all of this blew up."

Other projects employed the same strategy. A hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar Waldorf-Astoria was completed in Beverly Hills using a redrawn map of twelve connected tracts. A Chinese-themed hotel complex and casino called Resorts World went up in Las Vegas, financed through almost a billion dollars in EB-5 funding. In 2016, Jared Kushner's family used the program to build a fifty-story Trump-branded luxury-apartment building in New Jersey. The following year, Kushner's sister Nicole Kushner Meyer pitched another such development to a ballroom full of potential investors in China. An ad for the event read, "Invest $500,000 and immigrate to the United States."

Bill Stenger lives in a comfortable two-story house in Newport, Vermont, overlooking Lake Memphremagog. The space is lined with dark wood and crammed with candles, flowers, and a painted sign that reads, "A Day at the Lake with Friends & Family . . . Priceless." When I visited him there recently, the two of us sat at the dining table, which was covered with files from his years marketing Jay Peak. Stenger grew up in Corning, New York, where he spent his childhood winters coasting down hills on wooden skis. In 1964, he went to Mont Tremblant, in Quebec—his first experience at a real ski resort. Stenger said, of his first run, "When I got to the bottom and looked back up and saw the fresh tracks, I had such a rush that I'll never forget." In 1975, he began working in the ski industry. He taught his wife, a nurse named MaryJane, to ski at Killington, one of Vermont's better-known ski areas.

Stenger has trouble containing his passion for the sport. He cites a theory advanced by John Kitchin, a neurologist who left medical practice to spend his days rollerblading blissfully on the San Diego boardwalk. Kitchin believes that lateral movement of the sort involved in rollerblading and skiing stimulates the otolith, a piece of calcium carbonate that sits on a person's inner ear and triggers feelings of flow and euphoria. Stenger said, of ski slopes, "People are there to have a wonderful time with their families, their kids. There's nothing negative about it."

In 1984, Jay Peak's owner, Jacques Hebert, brought Stenger on as the resort's general manager. Jay Peak was beloved, but it lacked proper snowmaking equipment, and the lifts required upgrades. "I was excited to go to a place that needed help," Stenger said. Close to the mountain, there were few places to stay, and this restricted the number of people who could visit. Stenger always hated the month of April, the end of the season, when he had to lay off hundreds of people. Virgil Starr, a diminutive seventy-three-year-old maintenance worker, told me that his wife, mother, daughter, and all four of his brothers had worked at the resort in some capacity. Each spring, when Starr was laid off, he took a job at a local plywood factory, but he preferred laboring outdoors at Jay Peak. He said, of the resort, "Working here kept me young and spry and occupied."

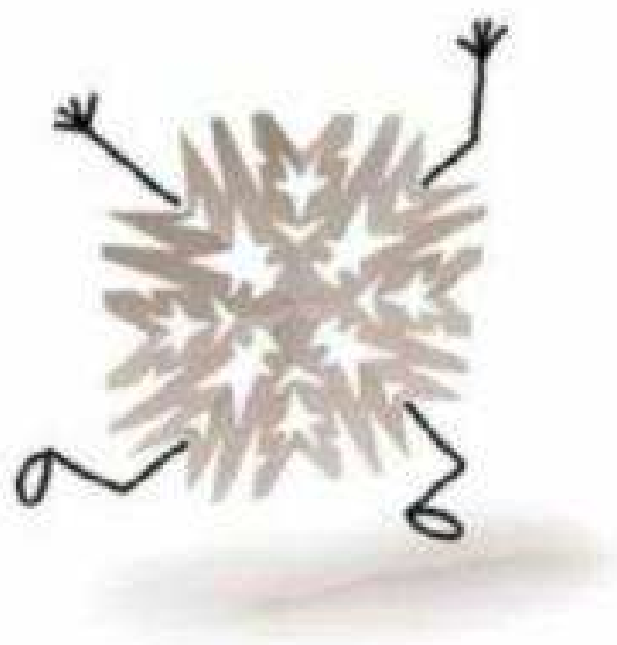
In the nineties, Stenger started sketching out an ambitious redesign that would make the resort viable year-round. "The thing I loved about this master plan was that it would allow me to keep my employees," he said. He shopped for potential backers, starting with some of the Canadian bankers who skied on the mountain. Joseph Gresser, the editor of the Barton *Chronicle*, a local paper, told me that every few years Stenger would announce that he'd found someone to help transform Jay Peak into a four-season resort. "And, every time, something happened," Gresser said. "They looked at the underlying numbers and decided it wasn't a good investment. There was a recession. Whatever." Jay Peak is in a part of Vermont known as the Northeast Kingdom. Tom Kavet, an economist for the Vermont state legislature, told me, "There have been many state programs that have tried to bring jobs to the area, but nothing really worked."

"I'm blanking on what I came in here to tell you."

Soon, Stenger learned about the EB-5 program. He teamed up with the administration of Howard Dean, the governor at the time, to create the nation's first federally authorized regional EB-5 center operated by a state. The center promised to monitor any such projects. In 2006, Hebert, Jay Peak's owner, suddenly died. Stenger set out to find a buyer for the resort, and started talking with Ariel Quiros, a Jay Peak condo owner. Quiros has rounded shoulders and a cool gaze. He grew up in Harlem and has said that, as a child, he sold Chiclets gum to classmates to make money. "When you have to survive, that's when you become an entrepreneur," he later told VTDigger, a local news site. He served in the military and was stationed in South Korea, where he met his wife. Quiros has said that, after leaving the Army, in 1980, he worked as a fixer, helping the Korean government develop trade with American companies. Eventually, he settled in Miami and ran an import-export business. "I was kind of a deal maker," he later told the S.E.C. in a deposition. "I was always trying to make the Koreans understand what the Americans are trying to think . . . and vice versa." (Quiros could not be reached for comment.)

Stenger's son, Andrew, the facilities director at Jay Peak, said that he distrusted Quiros and his associates "from the get-go." A former state official told me, "I left our first meeting feeling like I needed to take a shower." But Stenger was impressed by Quiros's wealth. "He always went to the retail shop and bought a lot of clothing," Stenger said. "He was a big tipper, a big spender, and the staff liked him." One of Stenger's lawyers, Brooks MacArthur, told me, "When presented with someone with status, Bill Stenger is like a kid meeting Mickey Mantle." Gresser said that Quiros was "the guy central casting would send over if you were looking for someone to play a dodgy character. No one would have believed him, except that Bill Stenger vouched for him."

Stenger had already helped to raise $17.5 million from foreign investors for the expansion of Jay Peak. He encouraged Quiros to buy the resort, and offered an incentive: as a sort of developer fee, Quiros would get a payment amounting to about fifteen per cent of the construction budget—totalling millions of dollars. In 2008, Quiros bought Jay Peak for about twenty-five million dollars. Stenger was made C.E.O., and Quiros gave him a fifteen-per-cent ownership stake in the resort, which could grow to twenty per cent in five years. Quiros consolidated the project's finances at a bank called Raymond James, based in Florida, where his former son-in-law, Joel Burstein, was employed as a broker. Looking back, the fact that Quiros was having a relative conduct the project's finances should have raised questions. But this is one of several subjects about which Stenger claims ignorance. "I did not know much about Raymond James," he told me. "I didn't know that its banking department was relatively small compared to its investment department. My bad."



In the years that followed, Stenger proved a wildly successful fund-raiser. He worked with an EB-5 consultant named Douglas Hulme, who connected him with investors abroad and received a fifty-thousand-dollar "administrative fee" for each investor he found. Stenger flew business class to Japan, China, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina. Many of the potential investors were women and their college-aged children, which Gordon, the investment adviser, told me is typical: wives often go abroad with their children, while husbands continue to work in their home countries. Stenger liked most of the investors he met, and invited many to stay at Jay Peak and "see what they were a part of"; when a Russian "oligarch knockoff" offered a million dollars in cash as an investment, though, he refused.

Often, state officials from the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, which housed Vermont's regional EB-5 center, joined Stenger on the trips. They touted their robust oversight, saying that they were monitoring the investment activity and collecting regular reports. Stenger made several thousand dollars' worth of donations to Patrick Leahy, Vermont's longtime senator, and Peter Welch, then a congressman. Leahy wrote Stenger a letter, later included in marketing materials, which noted, "Your vision, and the vision of your investors, has helped put several hundred people to work in a region devastated by a global recession." Leahy—who Stenger said became a "pretty close friend"—even popped in on an investor meeting in Ireland to praise the project, and brought Welch to another such meeting in Vietnam. "Between you and me, when a U.S. senator acknowledges you, that's a plus," Stenger told me. (Leahy and Welch did not respond to requests for comment.)

Construction began on Jay Peak's hundred-and-twenty-room hotel and its indoor water park. "Things went crazy," Starr, the maintenance worker, told me. "It was just phenomenal." Rob Conrad, a local contractor, said, "They started having to hire housekeeping and maintenance services for those buildings. It was a boon to the community." Governor Shumlin told me he was impressed: "There were hundreds and hundreds of people working there in hard hats, creating jobs."

Stenger's public profile rose enormously. He served on the governor's economic council, and was granted the Citizen of the Year award by the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. He continued to live in the same house and collect the same salary as he had as general manager, around two hundred thousand dollars a year. But he was confident that, once the expansion was complete, his ownership stake would make him wealthy. Quiros, meanwhile, bought two expensive apartments in Manhattan. Between 2012 and 2016, he donated thousands of dollars to the state Democratic Party and to Shumlin, and the two became close. Quiros liked to project power around the governor, suggesting at one point, according to Shumlin, that he might be able to arrange for Vermont to access cut-rate heating oil through his Venezuelan contacts. In 2013, Shumlin took Quiros up on an offer to stay in one of Quiros's Manhattan apartments while visiting the city, and stayed there again to celebrate his daughter's birthday. ("I don't like spending taxpayer money," Shumlin told me. "So, when anyone offered me their place as governor, and I could stay with them or in their apartment, I did it.") Shumlin also joined Stenger during two fund-raising trips, including one that passed through Beijing, Shenzen, Ho Chi Minh City, and Shanghai.

Insiders, though, were beginning to raise questions. Jay Peak's chief financial officer, a C.P.A. named Mike Du Pont, who snowboarded in his spare time, later told government agents that Stenger struck him from the beginning as "in over his head." Quiros controlled who had access to the financial statements. When Du Pont finally got to look at one, he noticed an irregularity: some of the investor funds were not available, because Quiros had used them as collateral on a margin loan. Du Pont quit, and was replaced by an accountant named John Carpenter, who was given the title of "controller." He, too, was denied access to the statements. He became concerned that money raised for specific construction projects was being used to cover other expenses, something he believed was a violation of the company's agreements. "There has been so much co-mingling of funds via transfers . . . that this has become quite a mess," he wrote in an e-mail to Stenger. Carpenter eventually quit, too. (Du Pont and Carpenter did not respond to requests for comment.)

For publicly traded companies, news that a C.F.O. and his replacement had resigned in swift succession would likely be interpreted as a sign of trouble. But Jay Peak's development continued apace. In 2012, Quiros surprised Stenger with the news that he had just purchased the nearby Burke Mountain, for ten million dollars. As Stenger recalled, Quiros said that investors in Korea had provided the funds; Quiros renamed it QBurke and installed his son as C.E.O.

Stenger told me that he was unhappy with the purchase, and felt that Quiros had rushed into it. But this doesn't seem to have tempered his ambition. He soon persuaded Quiros to launch an even bigger project: a six-hundred-million-dollar plan to develop the town of Newport. The idea was almost comical in scale. It included a seventy-five-thousand-square-foot facility to be operated in partnership with AnC Bio, a Korean biomedical firm that was run by a friend of Quiros's. The facility would make medical products and offer clean rooms for medical research. Stenger and Quiros also planned to build a hotel, a conference center, and a residential and retail complex, and to expand the local airport. Stenger hoped the effort would transform the town into a mini Silicon Valley.

The idea that highly paid scientists and executives would want to live in rural Vermont struck some locals as unlikely. Newport's major employers include a helmet-manufacturing firm, the public-school system, and a state prison. Woolf, the University of Vermont economist, told me, "It's a depressed city. There's a lot of poverty, and there's not much going on there." But Stenger insisted that Newport's location—within several hours of Quebec City, Montreal, and Boston—would be a draw. In a video for the *Times*, which accompanied a glowing article about the project, he noted, "No one would ever have the faith to invest in here in any meaningful way because it's so out of the way. . . . But we are, because we are from here. We have a vision." Senator Bernie Sanders, Leahy, Welch, and Shumlin all attended a press conference announcing the Newport project. Patricia Moulton, the former secretary of Vermont's Agency of Commerce and Community Development, told me, "For a lot of people in the community, it was, like, 'Finally, we're going to get our piece of the economic activity.'"

As far back as 2013, the Securities and Exchange Commission issued a warning to investors about fraud in the EB-5 program. In February of that year, it halted a scheme in which a developer, Anshoo R. Sethi, raised a hundred and fifty-six million dollars, mostly from Chinese investors, for a zero-carbon-emissions hotel and conference center in Chicago. Sethi, who was only twenty-nine, misrepresented his résumé, pretending to have fifteen years of experience in the hospitality industry. He never even applied for most of the building permits, and blew millions of dollars on personal purchases, including a cosmetic-surgery procedure that he gave as a present to his girlfriend. Sethi pleaded guilty to wire fraud, and was sentenced to three years in prison and ordered to repay investors. (Sethi's attorney did not respond to requests for comment.) A few years later, a lawyer named Victoria Chan pleaded guilty to fraud and money-laundering charges after raising fifty million dollars in EB-5 funding to build a hotel and a shopping center in California. The F.B.I. alleged that she had used the money to buy almost thirty million dollars' worth of private properties across the state; it also alleged that some of the investors who obtained green cards were fugitives wanted for committing crimes in China. (Chan declined to comment.)

The whole program, it turned out, lent itself to dishonesty. Faraway investors were desperate to get to the U.S., and didn't keep close track of where their money was going. The lawyers and brokers got large transaction fees and had little incentive to point out potential wrongdoing. "Everybody was making millions of dollars, but very few people wanted to speak the truth about the riskiness of these investments," Gibson, the EB-5 adviser, said. There was almost no governmental oversight built in. Although regional centers were supposed to monitor spending, there was no mechanism to insure that they were doing it. Moulton, the former commerce secretary, said, "As one who's worked with a lot of federally funded programs, this was probably the loosest and least regulated federal program I'd ever encountered."

In 2011, Gibson wrote multiple e-mails to the head of Vermont's regional EB-5 center, asking if it was actually conducting the audits of the projects that it claimed to be. The state, it turns out, had reviewed none of the projects' quarterly reports, as it had said it would. In an e-mail from 2014, Shumlin blamed this partly on a lack of resources: "We are running our staff ragged with travel and responding to inquiries and now complaints." He told me that outsiders had different ideas about what the state's monitoring was supposed to entail: " 'Oversight' is a very broad word. It means different things to different people." A local resident who happened to be a nurse researched the AnC Bio project on her own and then sent a twenty-one-page footnoted report to the state attorney general's office. The artificial organs that

Stenger promised would be manufactured at the new facility were years away from F.D.A. approval and commercial viability. Quiros, she discovered, had been involved in several previous failed ventures, and was facing a pending lawsuit from some unhappy investors. (The suit was later settled on undisclosed terms.)

In 2012, Hulme, the visa broker Stenger had been working with, pulled out of the projects (after making eighteen million dollars in fees), and released a letter saying that his company "no longer [had] confidence in the accuracy of representations made by Jay Peak, Inc." He then hired a lawyer and went to the S.E.C. with concerns that the projects' money was being mismanaged. (Hulme did not respond for comment. Quiros later told investigators, "When this SEC gets over with, I'm going to go after that man, I promise you. I will kill that man for what he did.") At about the same time, Stenger sent letters to a group of early investors telling them that, in an unusual move, their ownership stake in Jay Peak had been converted to an I.O.U., which Quiros would repay in the course of ten years. This struck several investors as theft, and they started complaining to state officials. Moulton said that, when she asked Stenger for an explanation, "he was brushing it off." (Stenger denies this.) A few months later, Anne Galloway, the founder of VTDigger, published a story about the accusations being made by the investors.

Within the state government, there was a mounting sense of alarm. Several Korean-speaking interns had found online that AnC Bio, which had been described as a thriving biotech firm, was actually in serious financial trouble in Korea. Its headquarters had been auctioned off by the government, and the address in Seoul that it had been using on U.S. marketing materials apparently didn't exist. That fall, Shumlin directed the state's Department of Financial Regulation, which had subpoena power, to investigate. When Michael Pieciak, the department's deputy commissioner, pressed those involved on the projects' finances, they were evasive. "I remember the lawyer saying, 'Well, Mr. Quiros is a man of untold wealth,'" Pieciak recalled. "It caught my attention."

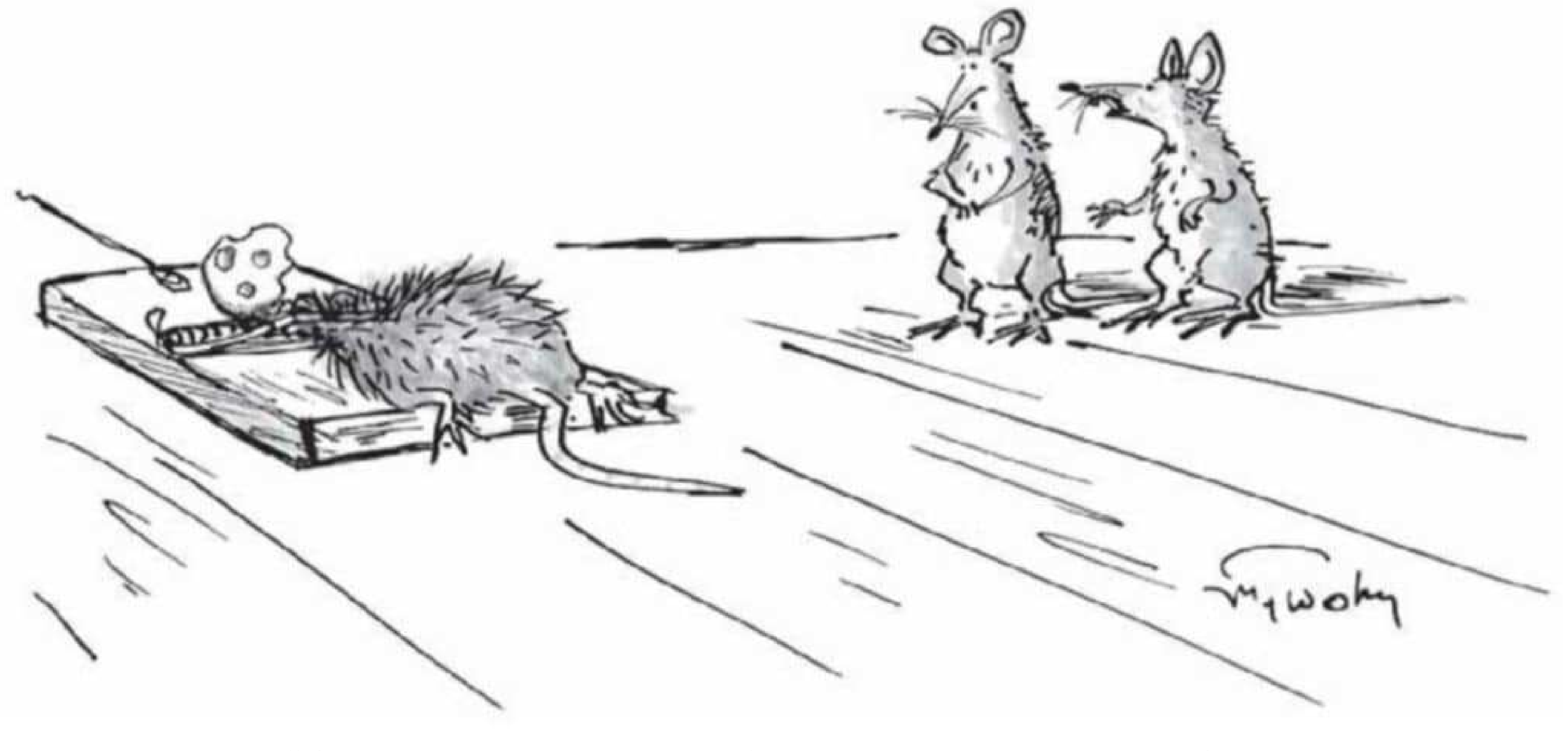
The S.E.C. had also started quietly investigating the projects, and soon the F.B.I. did as well. The lead F.B.I. agent on the case, Jennie Emmons, told me that she'd visited Jay Peak a few years earlier, on vacation with her kids. After driving through miles of remote farmland, she said, she was "blown away" to see the enormous scale of the construction happening on the hill. "Someone told me Chinese money had built this," Emmons recalled. "The whole thing just sounded crazy to me."

It quickly became clear that the Jay Peak project had been fraudulent from the start. According to the S.E.C., Quiros had illegally used EB-5 money to buy Jay Peak. In 2008, Stenger had already raised more than seventeen million dollars, earmarked for construction. Quiros's former son-in-law, Burstein, wired the funds to an account controlled by Quiros, who then put them toward the purchase of the resort. Quiros used a similar scheme to buy Burke Mountain. (Burstein could not be reached for comment.) From then on, according to the S.E.C., Quiros ran the financial side of the operation like a Ponzi scheme, taking money from new investor rounds to fill the holes in the previous ones.

Quiros and two associates also created falsified financial projections with padded expense numbers: they listed forty million dollars for "construction fit out and equipment," for example, when the real estimate was twenty-eight million, leaving twelve million to divide up among themselves. Quiros used the funds to buy hundreds of acres of land, and several homes in Vermont. "There were a million rabbit holes," Emmons, the F.B.I. agent, said. In one document, Quiros and his conspirators planned out future illicit payments, including four million dollars for one of the associates and one million for Stenger. After months of work, state investigators created a chart showing how money had moved through dozens of different entities, and into Quiros's pocket. It looked like a tangle of wires going every which way, and investigators referred to it as the "spaghetti map."

Stenger's defense is that he had no knowledge of what Quiros was doing with the money (a claim that investigators find implausible). He told me that, when he was later shown Quiros's documents laying out plans for the secret payments, he was shocked—and also indignant that they imagined giving him so little. "The million dollars they had ascribed to me I found insulting, because I was entitled to a lot more than that, given what I was contributing," he said. Still, investigators say that he promoted falsified projections, estimating, for example, that AnC Bio would sell almost three hundred million dollars' worth of artificial organs in the first five years, even though the organs weren't yet ready for market. Stenger said that he relied on third-party projections. "I *live* in Newport," he told me. "How could I promote a facility that's destined for failure in my own home town?"

Stenger insists that he had a sense that "something was going awry" only after he signed a new round of construction contracts, in 2015. Quiros told him that they had to slow down on creating new expenses; much of the money, Stenger recalled him saying, was "tied up in long-term notes." This was odd, because the money was supposed to be sitting in a sequestered account. Soon, contractors started walking off the job because they



"On the other hand, it's a shame to let a perfectly good piece of cheese just rot."

hadn't been paid. By this point, state officials were collaborating with the S.E.C. on its investigation. Nonetheless, officials allowed Stenger to continue trying to complete the projects, as long as investor funds were placed in escrow. "Our view was, a built hotel was better than a half-built hotel," Pieciak told me. In marketing documents, Stenger downplayed the seriousness of the S.E.C.'s involvement, noting that the agency was reviewing all EB-5 projects and that "securities laws are being complied with." He used these materials to raise almost forty million more dollars from investors in China.

According to Stenger, he hasn't spoken to Quiros since the S.E.C. raid, in 2016. "I was stunned," he said. When the S.E.C. receiver, Michael Goldberg, arrived to see the property, Stenger took him to the new Tram Haus Lodge, the golf clubhouse, the ice rink, the movie theatre–bowling alley, the indoor water park, and the wedding chapel, and to a collection of new bars, restaurants, and condos, all built with EB-5 money. Stenger drove Goldberg and his colleague Schneider to Burke, where the new hotel and conference center were nearly finished. "There was oil in the fry pans—it was that close to being operational," Schneider recalled. Goldberg asked Stenger to continue working while the case proceeded, in order to retain his institutional knowledge. But, Goldberg told him, "the second I find you did anything wrong, you're done."

Quiros and Stenger both settled their charges with the S.E.C. The following year, the U.S. Attorney for Vermont indicted the pair. Both pleaded guilty; Quiros was sentenced to five years in prison, for wire fraud and money laundering, and Stenger was sentenced to eighteen months, for submitting falsified documents. (Burstein paid a civil fine while admitting no wrongdoing.) Paul Van de Graaf, a prosecutor on the case, characterized it as one of the most significant in the state's history. "Many people in Vermont could not believe that something so bad had happened here," he said. "We needed to show not only that it could but that it did."

This past November, Stenger gave me a tour of Jay Peak. A brisk wind was blowing, and the ground was covered in the first snow of the season. While we visited the snowmaking room and the hotel, Stenger greeted employees warmly, asking detailed questions about their kids or ailing relatives. "Her dad works in the snowmaking division, and he's a farmer," Stenger said, about one employee. "He grows the best sweet corn."

Just a few months earlier, Stenger had been released from a low-security federal prison in Ayer, Massachusetts, after serving half of his sentence. Quiros is still incarcerated. More than six hundred foreign investors lost money, and many never got their green cards, because of the projects' failures. Felipe Accioly, an investor who moved to America from Brazil, is now at risk of being deported. "I lived in US for 10 years and I love the country," he wrote to me. "However, I have lived the last 7 years" with officials "holding a dagger upon my head. . . . All I can do is pray and ask God to touch the heart of the immigration guys to be honest and fair." The state recently settled a lawsuit with the projects' foreign investors over its lack of oversight, agreeing to pay sixteen million dollars. Russell Barr, who represents the investors, said he is outraged that no government officials faced legal consequences: "If they were in private industry, they probably would have been locked up." Stenger told me that he's broke and filled with regrets. When I pushed him on how he could have missed such rampant fraud, and ignored so many signs that caught others' attention, he claimed that he had been too busy to notice. "If you followed me around on a given day, running the resort, dealing with investors, raising money, thinking about the next project that was going on—my plate was overflowing," he said, his lips trembling. "I look back on it now and say, 'How could you be so naïve and careless?'"

Stenger takes comfort in the fact that the new, expanded Jay Peak is operational, which he sees as a sign that the development was justified. In 2022, it was sold to a resort group for seventy-six million dollars—significantly less than the amount that went into it. During the ski season, the restaurants and the lift lines are busy. But it's a long way from paying off the investment. "A developer using their own money never would have built a hotel with two hundred and fifty million dollars in this part of Vermont," Goldberg, the receiver, told me. "It was a bad business plan to begin with." In 2022, Leahy and others in Congress made changes to the EB-5 program aimed at reducing the potential for abuse. The legislation limits a project's ability to gerrymander maps, and sets aside funds to monitor for wrongdoing. Still, no one I spoke to felt that fraud in the program had been eliminated.

Stenger works for Goldberg occasionally, helping to sell the other properties. Currently, he's trying to find a buyer for the flattened lot in downtown Newport where the hotel and apartments were supposed to be built—an area overgrown with weeds that townspeople refer to as "the hole." He recently found a local snow-grooming-equipment manufacturer, Track, Inc., to occupy part of the intended AnC Bio building. When we visited, mold-remediation-spray equipment and giant fans were scattered around, left by workers. "Drugs are a big problem," Stenger told me. "It's hard to find reliable employees, and sometimes they disappear."

The newly elected mayor of Newport, Linda Joy Sullivan, is optimistic that the town can become a magnet for tourists, and brushes off the idea that it has been permanently scarred. She envisions a quaint hotel and restaurant where the hole is, or even a museum. "Everybody calls it 'the hole.' I call it 'the corner,'" she said. "I am working the best I can, and the most quickly that I can, to get this moving, but it doesn't happen overnight."

Van de Graaf, the prosecutor, told me that he doesn't believe Stenger was motivated primarily by greed. But he makes his contempt clear when discussing him. "Stenger had a vision for making things better that was partly altruistic and partly driven by ego," he said. "The mix of those things is for a psychologist to figure out, not for me." Moulton, Vermont's former commerce secretary, said she felt that he was at least partly driven by an ultimately flawed belief that he would bring positive change to the area. "Someday, there may be a syndrome named after this," she said. "You just want to do good, and the ends may justify the means." She added, "When everything went south, it was a bursting of a dream that I know a lot of people had. Every time I drive by it, I have to look away." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

EVERY TEN-BEST LIST

BY PAUL RUDNICK

1. Something so obscure and pretentious that you're the only person who's ever seen, read, or listened to it. Use the phrases "soul-shattering," "proudly noncommercial," "blazingly idiosyncratic," and "seemingly empty yet rife with meaning."

2. Something super-successful that you can ratify in a quasi-absurdist, neo-ironic way, with language like "populist," "ubiquitous," "surprisingly heartfelt," and "Taylor Swift meets Beyoncé meets Justin and Britney Beanie Babies."

3. A choice that proves you went to Harvard, have a podcast, and accept money from your parents in order to underwrite your nonlinear explorations of identity and also grab a week in Croatia and get noninvasive microcurrent facials.

4. Any author, recording artist, or director whom you personally "discovered" by owning an iPad.

5. A piece by someone of a different ethnicity or sexuality which will make people think that you might not be a heterosexual, cisgendered Caucasian, which is legit because you once used eyeliner/kissed a photo of Billie Eilish/supported an artist from the Pacific Islands, even if you're not sure what counts as a Pacific Island.

6. A work by an acknowledged older artist, which will allow you to speak the word "canonical" very loudly while on your phone in the coffee shop that you patronize because it's not a Starbucks and gets herbs from a community garden to make smoothies that might also involve kitty litter. Used kitty litter.

7. A project created by a women's collective, even if all the women have rich boyfriends and deny using Ozempic but simply "got so busy I forgot to eat."

8. A superhero movie, graphic novel, or neighborhood so despised that including it will make other people question their own judgments and choices of tote bags made from things they'd ordinarily wipe off the bottom of their shoes.

9. An offering rejected by every film festival, publisher, and YouTube viewer, which you made as your senior thesis and is still "ahead of its time," according to the five-star rating you posted on Yelp under the name NotBrian.

10. A creation that you truly liked but that might inspire comments like "tired," "too easy," "fascist," "expected," "patriarchal," and "typical," which is why you've added "I'm kidding—*or am I*?" right before you pitch your new idea to Netflix as " 'Barbie' meets 'Past Lives' meets 'Baby Yoda on Steroids.' " ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

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THE CONTROL OF NATURE

BURN NOTICE

What's really fuelling the wildfire crisis?

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

The provincial government of Alberta defines a "wildfire of note" as a blaze that could "pose a threat to public safety, communities or critical infrastructure." Last year, Alberta's first wildfire of note broke out unusually early, on April 30th, near the tiny town of Entwistle, about sixty-five miles west of Edmonton. A second wildfire of note was recorded that same day, in the town of Evansburg. Four days later, an astonishing seventy-two wildfires were burning, and three days after that the number had grown to a hundred and nine. Some thirty thousand people had to be evacuated, and Alberta's premier declared a state of emergency. "It's been an unusual year," Christie Tucker, an official from the province's wildfire information unit, observed at the end of the week.

The unusual soon became the unheard-of. Owing to a combination of low winter snowfall and abnormally high spring temperatures, many parts of Canada, including the Maritime Provinces, were just a cigarette butt away from incineration. On May 28th, with flames bearing down on Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia, some eighteen thousand people were told to evacuate. "Basically, all hell is breaking loose," a fire chief in Halifax, Rob Hebb, said. Meanwhile, the largest fire ever recorded in Nova Scotia—the Barrington Lake fire—was burning toward the city's southwest.

The fires kept hopscotching across the country. Before the Barrington Lake fire had been contained, a new monster, the Donnie Creek fire, emerged in British Columbia. On June 18th, after scorching more than two thousand square miles, Donnie Creek became British Columbia's largest recorded blaze. Saskatchewan saw dozens of wildfires, Quebec hundreds. Evacuation orders went out to the entire city of Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. Many of the blazes created their own weather, in the form of thunderstorms spawned by rapidly rising hot air. The smoke from the fires drifted across much of the United States, prompting health alerts from Minneapolis to Washington, D.C. By late June, Canada had broken its previous annual record for acreage burned, set in 1995, and by mid-October nearly forty-six million acres—an area larger than Denmark—had been charred. This was almost triple the previous record and nine times the annual average.

"This summer across Canada has been absolutely astounding," Lori Daniels, a professor in the department of forest and conservation sciences at the University of British Columbia, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "The word 'unprecedented' doesn't do justice to the severity of the wildfires," Yan Boulanger, a research scientist at Natural Resources Canada, said.

As bad as Canada's 2023 wildfire season was—Europe, too, saw its largest wildfire on record, a blaze that consumed more than three hundred square

BALAZS GARDI

The planet is warming so fast that the models firefighters rely on to predict how blazes will behave have become obsolete.

miles in northeastern Greece—the conflagrations are predicted to keep growing. A paper that appeared last summer in the journal *Fire Ecology* warned that "increasing warming and drying trends" will make wildfires "more frequent and severe," and a recent report from the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, a body established by Congress, predicted a future "defined by wildfires that are increasingly extreme, vast in scale, and devastating." Another recent report, from the Federation of American Scientists, observed that the world is warming so fast that the models firefighters rely on to predict how blazes will behave have become obsolete. "Climate change is drying fuels and making forests more flammable," the report said. "As a result, no matter how much money we spend on wildfire suppression, we will not be able to stop increasingly extreme wildfires."

As the wildfires have multiplied, so, too, have books on the subject. Recent volumes range from the intimate (Manjula Martin's "The Last Fire Season: A Personal and Pyronatural History") to the sweeping (Edward Struzik's "Dark Days at Noon: The Future of Fire") and the quick-turnaround ("The Summer Canada Burned: The Wildfire Season That Shocked the World," compiled by Monica Zurowski). Fire, it might be said, is a hot topic.

M. R. O'Connor's "Ignition: Lighting Fires in a Burning World" (Bold Type) began, in the author's telling, with a "gimmick." Several years ago, O'Connor, a Brooklyn-based journalist, visited Florida's Apalachicola National Forest with a local botanist. The two came upon a rare wildflower, *Gentiana catesbaei*, which, the botanist explained, thrives on recently torched ground. Many plants, O'Connor learned, have evolved to tolerate fire—these are known as pyrophytes—and some have come to depend on it to stimulate reproduction. Intrigued, she enrolled in Introduction to Fire Effects, an online course offered by the University of Idaho.

One thing leads to another, and pretty soon O'Connor finds herself travelling to central Nebraska to light it on fire. As part of a crew producing a "prescribed burn," she's handed a drip torch—basically, a fuel cannister attached to a long nozzle. Although she hasn't had much training, she's soon igniting the prairie. She describes the experience as "thrilling." A professional fire-setter tells her, "You have the fire bug."

In the course of starting more blazes—in upstate New York and California—O'Connor comes to see the wildfire problem less in terms of surfeit and more in terms of scarcity. Prior to human settlement, lightning-induced fires were, it seems, a regular occurrence in North America. These blazes acted as a kind of ecological reset; from the ashes of the incinerated forest (or grassland), pyrophytes blossomed. Later, Native Americans routinely burned the landscape—to foster the growth of useful plants, to clear space for farming, and to improve the conditions for hunting. In the sixteen-thirties, Thomas Morton, an English colonist who settled in Massachusetts, wrote that this practice produced a parklike landscape that was "very beautifull and commodious." Two hundred years later, the artist George Catlin described the sight of Native Americans burning the prairie as "indescribably beautiful." At night, Catlin wrote, the flames could be seen from many miles away, "creeping over the sides and tops of the bluffs, appearing to be sparkling and brilliant chains of liquid fire." In addition to maintaining parklike conditions, these managed blazes prevented fuel from building up, and so staved off larger, potentially unmanageable conflagrations.

Once the U.S. government had pushed Native Americans onto reservations and seized their land, controlled burning ceased across much of the country. Then the U.S. Forest Service moved to eliminate wildfires entirely. Gifford Pinchot, who became the agency's first director, in 1905, considered flames to be the enemy of the trees.

"Of all the foes that attack the woodlands of North America, no other is so terrible as fire," he wrote. Toward the end of the summer of 1910—an unusually dry one in the American Northwest—gale-force winds whipped up hundreds of blazes in Idaho and western Montana. These coalesced to form one of the largest forest fires in U.S. history—an inferno that killed eighty-seven people, destroyed several whole towns, and consumed more than three million acres. Following what became known as the Big Blowup, the Forest Service doubled down on fire control. William Greeley, who became the head of the agency in 1920, wrote that the great fire had "burned into" him the conviction "that fire prevention is the No. 1 job of American foresters."

In 1933, the Roosevelt Administration created the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of the earliest New Deal programs. The C.C.C. put millions of (mostly single) men to work on projects that included building fire lookouts, digging firebreaks, and fighting forest fires. In 1935, the leader of the Forest Service, Ferdinand Silcox, announced the "10 A.M. Policy." All fires on Forest Service land were to be extinguished by the morning after the day they were reported. Other federal agencies, following the Forest Service's lead, soon adopted similar policies. Though many blazes pushed past the 10 A.M. deadline, the policy remained in effect until the late nineteen-seventies.

Gradually, it became clear that fire suppression was wrecking many of the forests it was intended to save. (Among the trees whose seeds require fire to germinate are giant sequoias.) These days, O'Connor writes, the Forest Service likes to boast that it oversees the country's biggest prescribed-fire program, which burns almost 1.5 million acres a year. But this isn't nearly enough to make up for what's become known as the "fire deficit." According to some estimates, this deficit amounts to more than three million acres just in the mountains of New Mexico and Arizona, and according to others it amounts to more than ten million acres across Washington and Oregon. A wildlife biologist whom O'Connor meets in central Nebraska tells her that the controlled burns he's organized in the past decade have charred about thirty thousand acres. But to preserve the prairie that remains, he estimates, nearly twice that area should be combusted every year. "I have a dream of road-to-road fires one day," he tells her. "Our goal here is to dream big."

At one point in her travels, O'Connor visits Yosemite National Park with Stephen J. Pyne, a professor emeritus at Arizona State University. Pyne might be described as the Gibbon of fire history; he has written some thirty books on the subject, including a nine-volume work, “To the Last Smoke,” on the legacy of fire in different regions of the U.S. As O’Connor was interviewing Pyne for her book, Pyne was researching a book of his own, “Pyrocene Park: A Journey Into the Fire History of Yosemite National Park” (University of Arizona).

Geologically speaking, we live in the Holocene, the epoch that began about twelve thousand years ago, at the close of the last ice age. But many geologists argue that the Holocene, too, has come to an end, and that we have entered a new epoch, widely referred to as the Anthropocene. Pyne believes that the new epoch would be better labelled the Pyrocene, a term of his own invention. “The Pyrocene began when a fire-wielding creature met a fire-receptive period in the Earth’s history and their interaction made anthropogenic fire an informing presence,” he writes in a previous book, “The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next.”

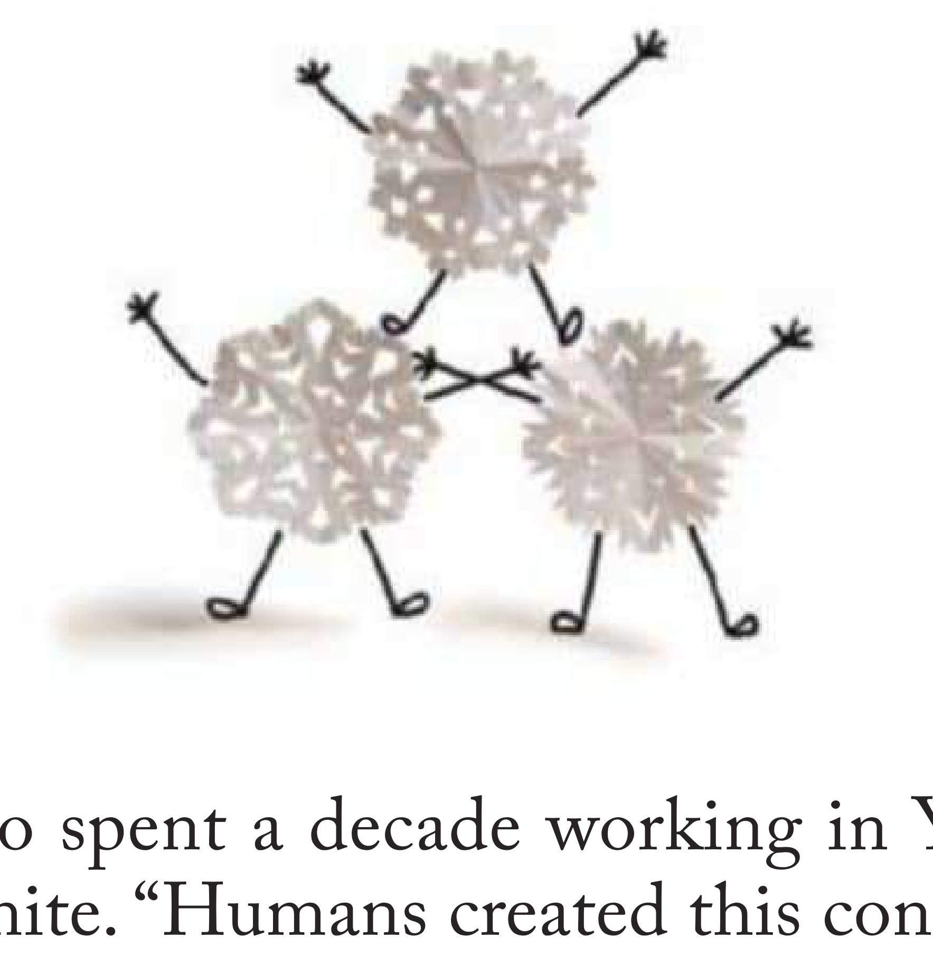
Pyne’s argument for the Pyrocene begins with fire itself, which he divides into three sorts. “First-fire” is the kind that requires no human intervention. This sort is as old as the hills, or even older: the earliest evidence of fire on Earth comes from fossilized charcoal dating to the Silurian period, when plants were just starting to creep onto dry land. Second-fire, in Pyne’s scheme, is the kind that humans set, or at least control. It’s not clear when, exactly, hominins learned how to manipulate fire, but the discovery may go back as far as 1.5 million years. Controlling fire was such a significant breakthrough that, Pyne argues, it altered the course of evolution. Cooking enabled our ancestors to devote less space to digestion and more to cognition, developments that, in turn, meant humans could no longer live without flames.

First-fire and second-fire both rely on the same fuel source: living—or at least recently live—plants. For most of human history, this was the constraint on combustion. Then people figured out how to access ancient biomass in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas. The combustion of fossil fuels produced third-fire, which altered the atmosphere and, in the process, the climate. “Fire created the conditions for more fire,” Pyne writes.

Like O’Connor, Pyne proposes fighting more fire with fire. He advocates a return to the sort of “cultural burning” once practiced by Indigenous peoples not just in North America but in almost all parts of the world where the landscape is flammable. “If fire there will be—must be—then replace fires of chance with fires of choice,” Pyne urges. He praises the Australians, who are trying to revive cultural burning practices on Aboriginal lands. “The suppression of fire practices was part of colonizing the land; restoring fire is seen as a means to recover some of those losses,” he writes.

Toward the end of “Ignition,” O’Connor visits the Yurok Reservation, in Northern California, to participate in a prescribed burn. The exercise is a collaboration between tribal members and an assortment of outsiders eager to be part of what O’Connor calls the “good-fire revolution.”

“With all these megafires, they finally realize, ‘Oh, maybe we should ask these Indigenous peoples how to take care of the forest,’ ” Margo Robbins, a Yurok basket-maker and activist, tells her. “We took care of it for ten thousand years.” As it happens, one of the directors of the operation, Kelly Martin, is a wildland firefighter who spent a decade working in Yosemite. “Humans created this condition, and humans can step in to remediate it,” Martin says. “We have no time to waste.”

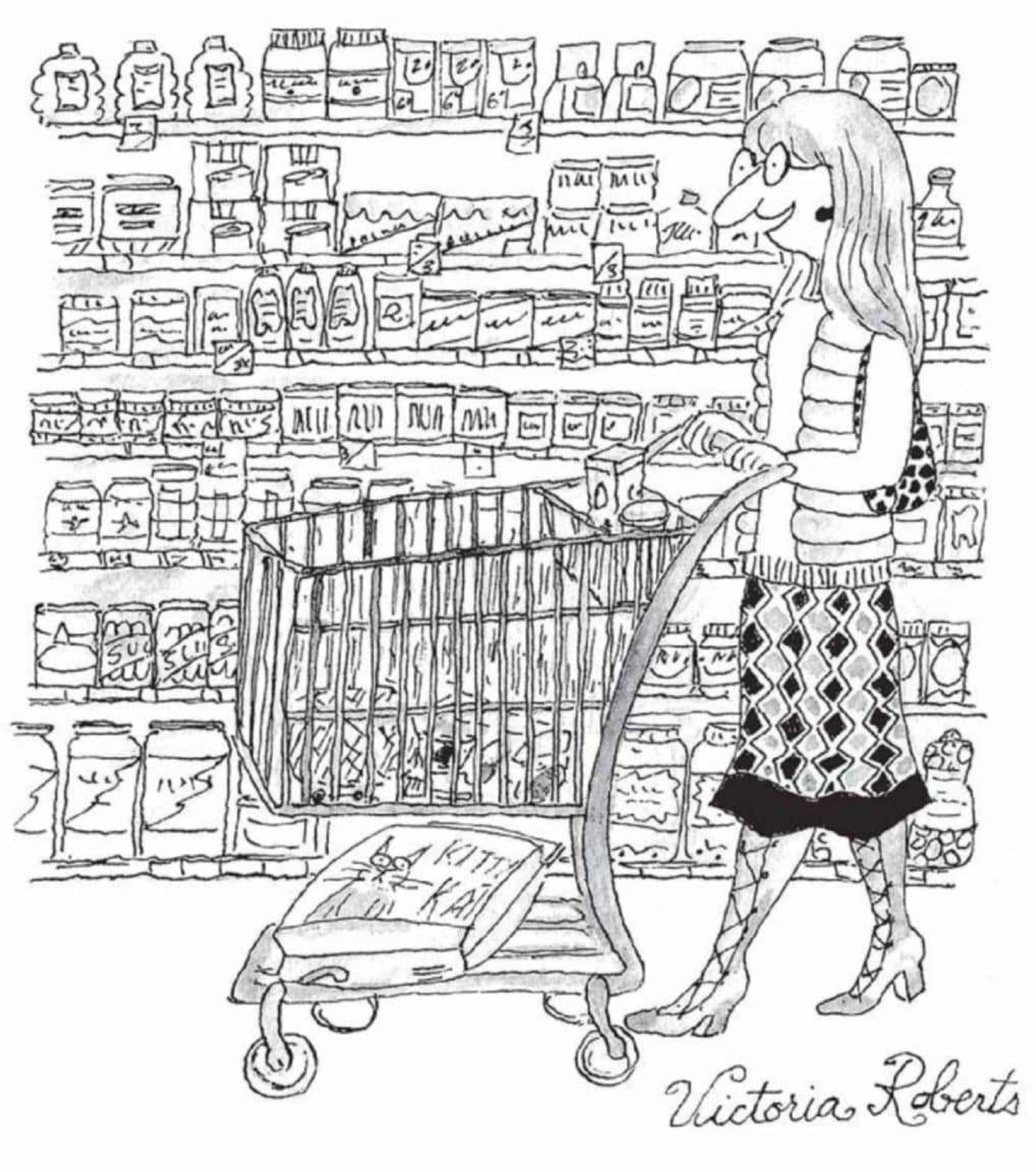


If the summer of 2023 was Canada’s worst wildfire season on record, its costliest remains 2016’s, when flames swept through Fort McMurray, a city in northern Alberta. The Fort McMurray fire forced roughly ninety thousand people to evacuate, destroyed more than two thousand homes, and caused billions of dollars’ worth of damage. In a chronicle of the event, “Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World” (Knopf), John Vaillant proposes yet another name for our new epoch: the Petrocene. The Petrocene, he argues, began a century and a half ago with the discovery of oil, which put immense amounts of energy at the disposal of ordinary people.

“Behind the wheel of a Chevy Silverado, a one-hundred-pound woman can generate more than six hundred horsepower,” Vaillant, a Vancouver-based writer, observes. “Prior to the Petrocene Age, only a king or a pharaoh could have summoned such power, and its equivalent would have required hundreds of enslaved people and draft animals.”

The Fort McMurray fire is, in Vaillant’s telling, a cruelly appropriate Petrocene disaster. The city, nicknamed Fort McMoney, owes its existence to the Alberta tar sands, a vast deposit of low-quality oil that has to be either dug or steamed out of the ground. Pretty much everyone who lived in Fort McMurray at the time of the fire worked, either directly or indirectly, on getting this oil to refineries, so that it could be pumped into gas tanks and combusted. The resulting carbon dioxide—together with the CO_2 from burning billions of tons of coal and tens of billions of barrels of conventional oil—contributed to the hot, dry conditions that turned Fort McMurray into a tinderbox. The fire spread so fast that many residents barely made it out, along the city’s sole southbound highway. “Combustive energy had drawn people to Fort McMurray,” Vaillant writes, and combustive energy drove them “out again, en masse.”

Fort McMurray was carved out of Canada’s vast boreal forest, and its location, too, was key to the catastrophe. Many of the most destructive wildfires of recent years have jumped from forests or grasslands into communities situated in what’s become known as the “wildland-urban interface,” or WUI (pronounced “woo-ee”). As Vaillant puts it, the WUI “is a beau-



"I'm looking for love, but I'll settle for peanut butter."

• •

tiful place to live, until it goes feral."

According to Nick Mott and Justin Angle, the authors of "This Is Wildfire: How to Protect Yourself, Your Home, and Your Community in the Age of Heat" (Bloomsbury), construction in the WUI is yet another reason wildfires are becoming more dangerous. (The two put it on par with climate change and the history of fire suppression.) We're putting up more homes than ever before, they write, in "areas ripe for fire."

In the U.S., California is the state that has the most housing in the WUI—about five million units. Texas comes in second, with more than three million. And the figures keep climbing: between 1990 and 2020, the total number of homes in the zone increased by nearly fifty per cent in the U.S., to more than forty-four million.

"Why do we keep building so vigorously where people are most at risk of losing their homes and lives to wildfire?" Mott, a Montana-based journalist, and Angle, a professor at the University of Montana College of Business, ask. Part of the answer, they conclude, lies in the way the risk is spread around. When a serious wildfire threatens a community, the federal government often gets involved. In this way, it's not just those who live in the WUI who bear the cost of trying to protect it; it's also, Mott and Angle write, "*you*, the taxpayer." A 2023 study they cite concludes that, in the fire-prone American West, this implicit subsidy can amount to more than twenty per cent of a home's value. Meanwhile, local government officials, who are responsible for most zoning decisions, have little incentive to curb construction in the WUI. On the contrary, local governments depend on new development to bring in more property-tax revenue. "If I'm a county commissioner, why would I care if that house burns down?" Kimi Barrett, a policy analyst at Headwaters Economics, a nonprofit research group, tells the authors. "Because I'm not going to pay for it."

Mott and Angle have all sorts of suggestions for individuals who want to reduce the odds that their homes will go up in smoke. They urge those who live in high-risk areas to replace wood-shingled roofs with metal ones, remove lower limbs from trees, and keep woodpiles at a distance. But, they acknowledge, these sorts of home-hardening projects do little to address the larger issue of development in the WUI, which, they say, has become a "cycle" that will be "hard to reverse."

Canada's 2016 wildfires, which included but were not limited to the Fort McMurray fire, released about a hundred and seventy million tons of carbon dioxide into the air. The following year, according to the European Union's earth-observation program, carbon emissions from Canada's wildfires rose to about four hundred million tons. In 2023, they came to an astonishing 1.7 billion tons.

These figures point to another hard-to-reverse cycle. When trees burn, they release the carbon they took up while growing. This carbon contributes to warming, which increases the likelihood of wildfires, which release more carbon, and so on. In the far north, this cycle is exacerbated by the soil, which is often loaded with dead plant material. Igniting such carbon-rich soil further adds to emissions.

More prescribed burning, more metal roofs, better zoning—these are all steps that could make a significant difference at a local level. But dealing with the wildfire crisis on a regional or a national scale would require addressing the CO_2 feedback loop, which is impossible for any region or nation to do on its own. Hence the predictions of a flame-filled future. As Pyne observes in one of his bleaker moments, "We have created a Pyrocene. Now we have to live in it." ♦

ANNALS OF MUSIC

THE NEXT SCENE

Lucian Grainge helped the music industry survive file-sharing. Now he wants to do the same with A.I.

BY JOHN SEABROOK

Sir Lucian Grainge, the chairman and C.E.O. of Universal Music Group, the largest music company in the world, is curious, empathetic, and, if not exactly humble, a master of the humblebrag. His superpower is his humanity. A sixty-three-year-old Englishman, who was knighted in 2016 for his contributions to the music industry and has topped *Billboard’s* Power 100 list of music-industry players several times in the past decade, Grainge is compact and a bit chubby, with alert eyes behind owlish glasses. He isn’t trying to be noticed. He presides over a public company worth more than fifty billion dollars, but he could be a small-business owner who sells music in a London shop, as did his father, Cecil. On earnings calls, Grainge can sound more like a London taxi dispatcher than a chief executive. But woe to those who mistake his European civility for a lack of competitive fire. “He is so deceptive with that little kind face and those little glasses,” Doug Morris, the previous chairman of UMG, told the *Financial Times* in 2003, when he was still Grainge’s boss. “Behind them, he is actually a killer shark.” In 2011, Grainge devoured Morris’s job.

As UMG’s leader, he has solidified the dominance of Universal, the largest of the Big Three label groups, helping it to overtake Warner Music and Sony. More than half of Spotify’s twenty most streamed artists of all time are signed to UMG. But Grainge is also the consummate music man, with forty-five years of experience on both the publishing and the label sides of the business. He oversees a long list of formerly independent labels, including Interscope, Republic, Capitol, Motown, and Island. “Lucian’s like the league commissioner,” Monte Lipman, who founded Republic with his brother Avery, told me. Don Was, the head of Blue Note, UMG’s storied jazz label, said, “He’s the smartest motherfucker in the music business, period. He can operate in the artistic world, and he can operate in the financial world, which are two very different beasts.”

Grainge lives and works in Los Angeles, but West Coast fitness culture has yet to make a convert of him. He neither skis nor golfs, although he sometimes drives the cart for other golfers, doing business between holes. He doesn’t drink or smoke, and, as for drugs, “I panic when I have to take an aspirin,” he has said. He is a family man whose first wife, Samantha Berg, suffered complications while giving birth to their son, Elliot, in 1993, and spent the remaining years of her life in a coma—a profound loss that has colored his world view as much as any professional experience. In March, 2020, Grainge was among the first wave of people in L.A. to contract COVID, and he nearly died, spending eighteen days on a ventilator. After recovering, he told me in his office last November, he had survivor’s guilt. “Why me?” he kept asking himself.

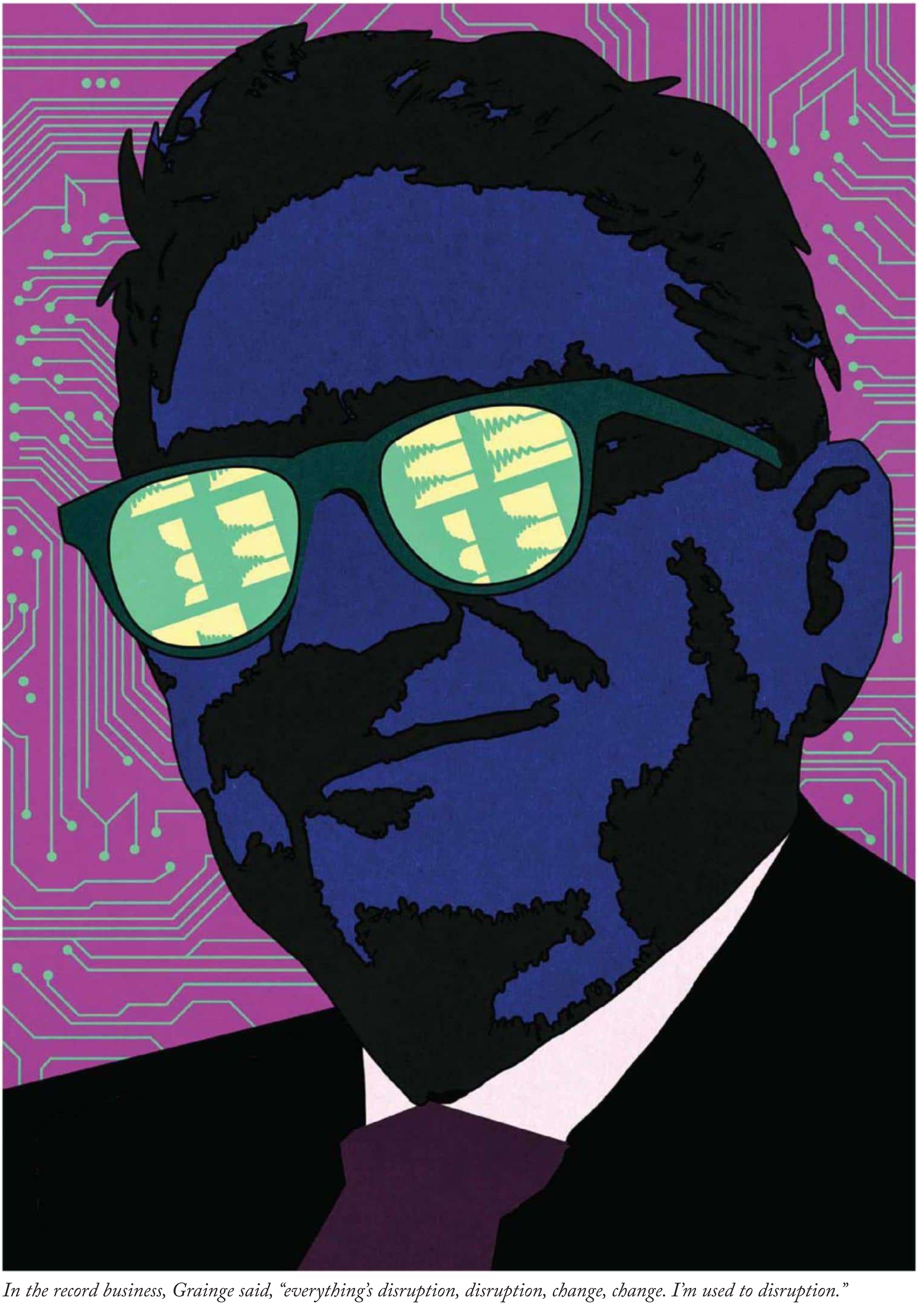
Grainge’s son, Elliot, now thirty and a record man himself (his label, 10K Projects, signed the Gen Z sensation Ice Spice), told me, “We’re not from Hollywood.” He added, of his father, “He doesn’t put on a show, a façade, like so many people out here do—there’s a total difference of personality. He’s from an insular Jewish community in North London. He has a village mentality.”

Still, music has made Grainge a very rich villager. One British music executive told me, “Winning means more to him than to almost anyone else I have met in the music business”; money is just a way of keeping score. Although Grainge’s annual salary—five million dollars—is relatively modest for his position, he received a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar bonus for successfully taking UMG public, in 2021. Some shareholders objected to the size of this “transition” compensation, deeming it “excessive.” In the U.K., Grainge’s pay package was even discussed in Parliament, in the context of a proposed bill that was promoting equity in the music business. A Conservative M.P., Esther McVey, said, “It’s shocking that record-label owners are earning more out of artists’ works than the artists themselves.”

Grainge lives in a mansion in Pacific Palisades with his second wife, Caroline, whom he married in 2002, and with whom he has raised a daughter, Alice, and a stepdaughter, Betsy. When he got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, in 2020, Lionel Richie—a longtime Universal artist, and the father of Elliot’s wife, Sofia—honored him at the ceremony. (“That’s a real copyright!” Grainge exclaimed to me approvingly about Richie’s evergreen tune “Hello.” “A wedding and bar-mitzvah song!”) He is highly regarded both by UMG’s artists and by the company’s investors, an extraordinarily difficult twofer to pull off.

His old friend Bono, whose band, U2, is on Island, told me, “Lucian doesn’t do varnish. If you’re looking for varnish from Lucian, you’d better be drinking it. He is exactly as he appears.” He added, “People like us are practiced in the art of dizziness, and the music business can be a dizzy world. But for those of us who like to know where the doors, walls, and windows are, facts are friendly, and they’re more friendly if they don’t come with the kind of back-slapping, white-crowned varnish”—the kind with which music executives often treat artists. Bono did an impression of Grainge for me. “Can’t do it, mate!” he barked. “No! Will not. Not gonna happen!” He added that, as a musician, “I feel very comfortable when I know who I’m in the room with, when I don’t have to negotiate with a Janus-faced man.”

Which is not to say that Grainge is always easy to understand. He favors

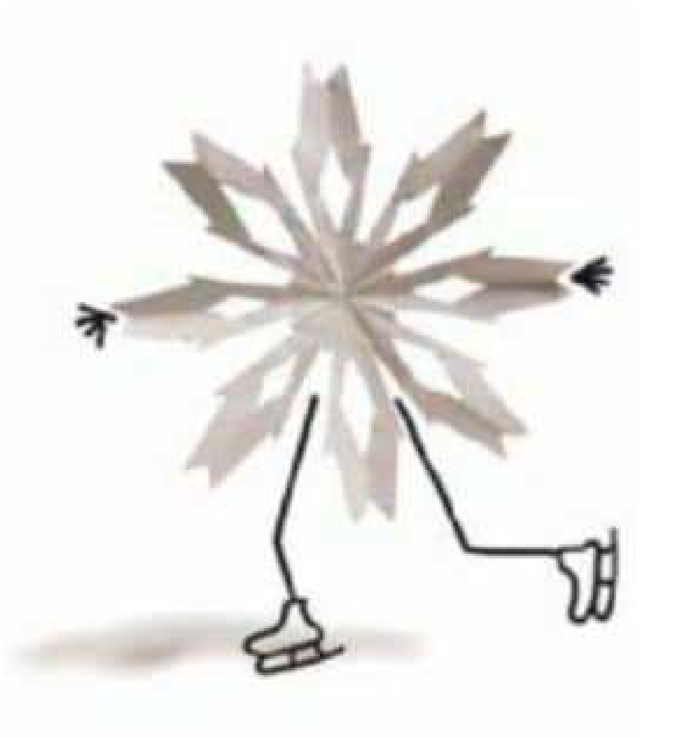


SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LIVINGSTON / GETTY

In the record business, Grainge said, "everything's disruption, disruption, change, change. I'm used to disruption."

ILLUSTRATION BY SEB AGRESTI

off-the-wall analogies, often involving cars, which he collects. When Grainge first met the English singer-songwriter Jamie Cullum, he declared, "Jamie! You're like a Formula 1 sausage roll," an exchange that has been captured for posterity in a cartoon Cullum drew that hangs on a wall outside Grainge's office. "He talks in riddles, which I find endearing," Jody Gerson, who runs UMG's global publishing company, told me. "Weird historical British references, Yiddish things, and every now and then he'll say, 'Do you know what I mean?' And I'm, like, Do I admit that I don't? He once said to me, 'Jody, I think like a jazz musician. I don't always know exactly how I'm getting there, but I know where I'm going to end up.' Lucian knows what he's doing at all times, and that's his process."



Among investors, Grainge is seen as an executive whose strategic use of technology has reshaped the industry's business model. At an investor presentation in 2021, Bill Ackman, whose hedge fund, Pershing Square Capital Management, owns ten per cent of UMG, compared Grainge's impact on the music business to that of Netflix's Reed Hastings on the TV and film industry; he has also likened Grainge to Walt Disney and Steve Jobs. Irving Azoff, of Full Stop Management, told me that Grainge, who attracted Ackman's fund and the Chinese tech conglomerate Tencent, which owns twenty per cent of UMG, had created a global investor base to match the company's roster of global superstars. That, in turn, had enhanced the value of the music industry as a whole, "which had always been traditionally undervalued," Azoff said.

In the course of Grainge's forty-five years in the business, everything about the way people create, sell, and consume music has changed. Distribution, once a mainstay—you needed labels to physically get records into stores—has become as easy as hitting an Upload button. Promotion of new music, which labels once controlled by way of radio d.j.s, now occurs on streaming platforms, where algorithms determine playlists. Product lives in the cloud, and revenues, formerly derived from sales of albums and singles, have given way to regular royalty payouts from streaming services. Music executives, who used to come up in the record business, like Grainge and Rob Stringer, the head of Sony Music, are now as likely to be lawyers, private-equity managers, turnaround specialists, or tech leaders—such as Robert Kyncl, the recently appointed C.E.O. of Warner Music Group, who was previously an executive at YouTube.

And yet, unlike print media, television, and film—other creative industries that have struggled to adapt to similar digital transformations—the music industry, after a severe contraction in the first decade of the century, now appears to be more profitable than ever. Streaming revenues alone reportedly surpassed seventeen billion dollars in 2022. It was arguably Grainge who, more than any other executive, defied the grim prognostications of the industry's imminent demise in the early two-thousands. How did he manage it? After all, even though UMG controls the content, Google, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, et al. own the technology.

"It's called a 'wriggle,'" Grainge, in his large sixth-floor corner office, told me on a gray November day. He sat at an oblong table with his back to the window, which faces east toward downtown Santa Monica. A guitar signed by Amy Winehouse was nearby. He held out his hand and wriggled it, his fingers moving like fish nosing through coral. "You're going to have to figure out if you're going to go above, beneath, around the side, or through."

In March, 2023, Neal Mohan, who had just become the C.E.O. of YouTube, received a message from Grainge that said, "Hey Neal, congratulations, when can we meet?" Mohan told me, "It was typical Lucian in that it was warm and friendly, but it was clear that he had real urgency in his request to talk." The subject was A.I.

A. & R. scouts are said to have ears, and Grainge sports an impressive pair of aural appendages that move up and down the sides of his head when he's talking. But Grainge uses his nose. "I've always been able to smell intuitively what the next scene is," he said. "Whether it's punk or New Romantics, I've always enjoyed it, picked up on it, and this is my view of technology." Generative A.I., which can produce novel images, text, and music, smelled to him like the next big scene. "That's all I am—a talent scout."

The industry is facing yet another revolution, but what sort isn't yet clear. Is A.I. a format change in the way music is consumed, like the transition from records and cassettes to CDs, or is it a threat to the business model, as were free downloading and file-sharing? Is generative A.I. a new kind of digital workstation for making music, or is it the new radio—a platform for promoting acts and engaging with fans? Is a new era of musical invention at hand, or will A.I. cripple human creativity?

In April of 2023, an anonymous producer called ghostwriter used A.I. voice replications of Drake and the Weeknd to create a deepfake duet called "Heart on My Sleeve." The "Fake Drake" song quickly went viral, sending waves of fear through the industry; Universal's stock fell by roughly twenty per cent between February and mid-May, over concerns about generative A.I. eroding the value of its copyrights. (The stock has since recovered, and is near an all-time high.) Grainge invited me to imagine an illegitimate version of a Kanye West song featuring Taylor Swift's voice: "Get your head around that. And then it's ingested into one of the platforms and someone starts monetizing it." He added, "I haven't spent forty-five years in the industry just to have it be a free-for-all where anything goes. Not going to happen while I'm still here!" At the same time, he didn't want to miss out, in case A.I.-generated material became a new source of revenue for artists—and their labels.

Before Mohan's appointment, YouTube, which is owned by Google, had developed several key music-related products: paid-subscription services and Content ID, an automated way to detect copyrighted music on the platform. These products dramatically altered YouTube's relationship with the music industry, turning the lawless wasteland of the early twenty-first century into the industry's Elysian Fields. Between July, 2021, and June, 2022, YouTube paid more than six billion dollars to rights holders globally.

Last spring, Grainge flew to San Bruno, south of San Francisco, where YouTube is based. This was around the time that people in nearly every content industry were awakening to the fact that Google, Microsoft, Meta, and OpenAI were scraping material of all kinds from the Internet to use in training their A.I. models. As lawyers in all those content businesses mulled suing for copyright infringement, Grainge's instinct was to play with the technology. It was the same approach he had taken to music streaming. "He experiments early," Daniel Ek, a founder of Spotify, told me. "So then the cost isn't as huge later, because you're not betting the farm on everything you're trying to do."

DeepMind, Google's artificial-intelligence research lab in London, had been working on generative-A.I. music technology. One model—which Google later dubbed Lyria—was just emerging from the lab, and Mohan and his colleagues were beginning to ponder how to put it to use. He welcomed Grainge's input. "I remember in one of our first conversations Lucian said we need a constitution," Mohan recalled. Working with YouTube colleagues, Mohan came up with three "principles": a commitment to the "responsible" use of A.I. in collaboration with music partners; a pledge to continue refining safety protocols and guardrails; and systems that would help counteract trademark and copyright abuse. Google has created a tool called SynthID, which can watermark and detect synthetically generated content.

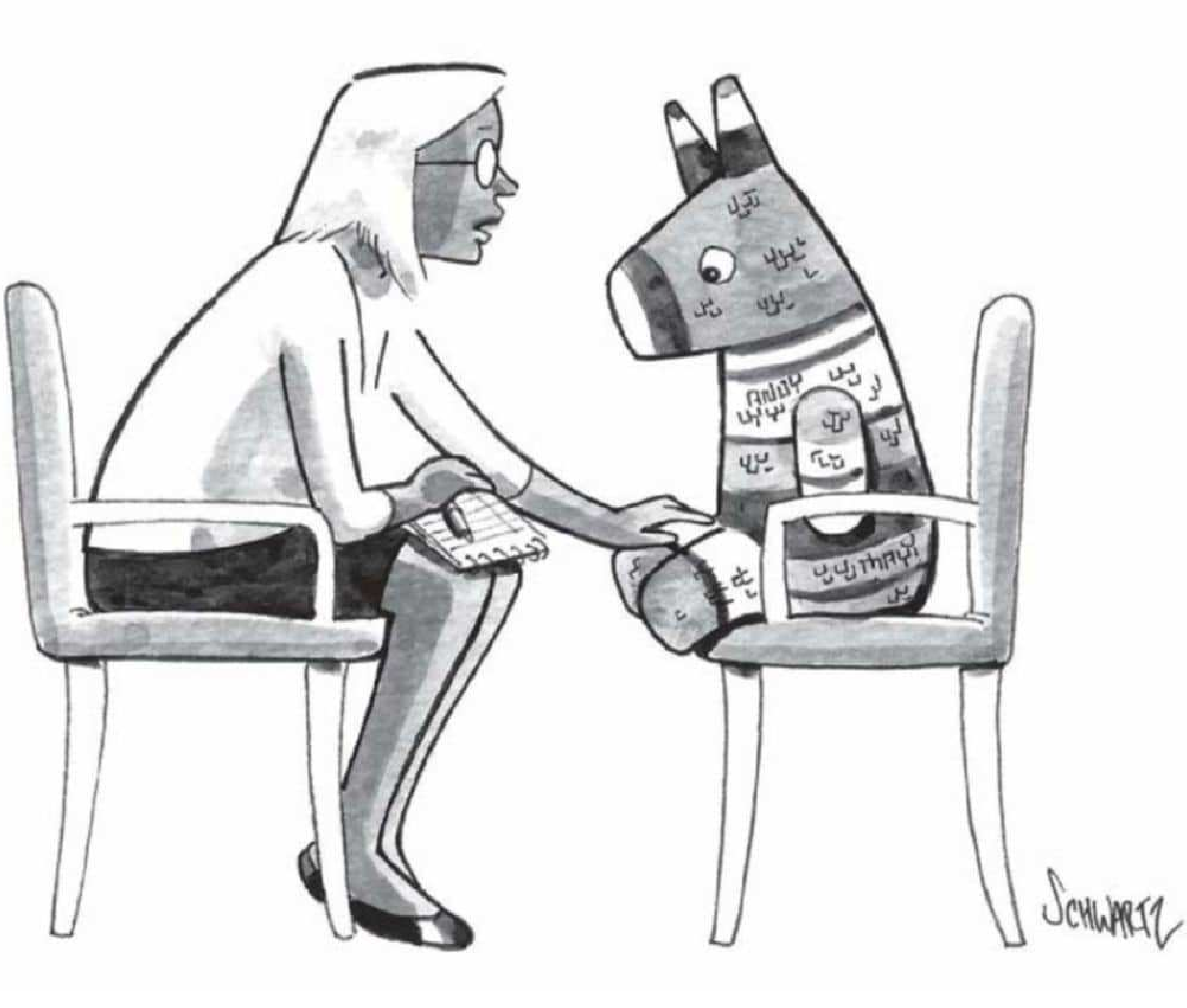
Still, it seemed highly likely that music-generating A.I.s had been trained on at least some copyrighted material, without a license. In experimenting with the technology, would Grainge be implicitly endorsing the scraping that UMG's lawyers could potentially go to court to stop? Grainge told me that the industry's historical response to engaging with tech companies had been fear. "The lawyers have done what's necessary to protect us," he said. "But if a strategy is only seen through the lens of what can go wrong, the people running the business become scared and paralyzed. Well, I don't do scared."

"I always say that the music industry chooses you," Grainge told me. In the nineteen-fifties, his father, Cecil, was the proprietor of GrAInge, a North London record shop and appliance retailer. (The "AI" in the logo was uppercased, a spooky coincidence.) Grainge has an early memory of watching his father shave while he whistled "Hey Jude": "How is it he's not cutting himself? He couldn't stop whistling that melody." Music was always playing in the house. "I'd get woken up to Neil Diamond, the 'Radetzky March,' Fats Domino, lots of Ray Charles," he said.

"It's in the blood," Irving Azoff said of being in a music family; both of his sons are in the industry. "Being around it your whole life, you get a perspective you couldn't learn in business school."

Grainge's half brother Nigel, thirteen years his senior, had begun a career in music that would eventually lead to his signing Sinéad O'Connor, the Waterboys, Thin Lizzy, 10cc, and Bob Geldof's band, the Boomtown Rats, to his record label, Ensign, which he founded in 1976. He took Lucian, still in his mid-teens, to see the Ramones on their first U.K. tour. Grainge also saw the Sex Pistols and the Stranglers, among other punk acts, and hung out in a derelict house where the Damned rehearsed. He loved it all, including being gobbed on at gigs. "I had a jacket covered with saliva," he said. "I used to leave it on a heap on the floor." He also learned to pogo. "Because I was normally the shortest one at the club, people would use me to pogo off," he said. "When Bob Geldof got smacked in the mouth at the Music Machine"—a venue in Camden Town—"and lost his front teeth, the guy who did it pogoed off my shoulders." (Geldof, who has also been knighted in the intervening years, recalled the young Grainge as "kind of annoying, in a little brother way," but clarified that, although his lip was bruised and his nose bloodied that night, no teeth went missing.)

When Grainge was seventeen, a talent agent in Soho hired him as a sandwich guy, the lowliest gofer. He balanced work with study at Queen Elizabeth's School, a venerable institution for boys in North London, established in 1573. His mother, Marion, a certified public accountant, was keen for her son to go to university; Grainge didn't see the point. He agreed to take his A-level exams, but during one of the tests a proctor admonished him for wearing



"Let it out. Let it all out."

"It's hard to refuse a dying man's last request—I just wish he'd wanted a burial at sea."

red shoes instead of black ones, which Grainge was said to have been "really fucked off" about. He walked out of the exam and later that day signed a producer to the agency he worked for. His mother was livid; his father, who had left school at age fourteen, didn't care. (Years later, when Elliot told his father that he wasn't planning on attending college, Grainge wouldn't hear of it. Elliot graduated from Northeastern.)

In 1979, Maurice Oberstein, an American record man who helped build CBS Records U.K. into a powerhouse in the late seventies, hired Grainge as an A. & R. scout on the publishing side. A towering figure in the British music industry, Obie, as Oberstein was called, appeared to enjoy making visitors uncomfortable by behaving eccentrically, bringing his dog to meetings and pretending that he was listening to the canine's advice. "Obie was one of the most brilliant record executives I ever met," Grainge told me. "He absolutely terrified me and most of the people around him." (Grainge has been known to have a similar effect at times. "It's how he tests you," John Janick, the head of Interscope, told me.)

In 1979, Grainge signed the Psychedelic Furs to a writing contract, mainly because of their song "Sister Europe," which hadn't yet been released. He spent a decade in publishing, traditionally the more conservative wing of the business: while the labels focus on breaking new acts, publishing favors a measured approach, building long-term value in evergreens. As a "song guy," Grainge acted as a consultant to writer-performers he signed, and developed material for established artists who didn't write. In 1982, he became the director of R.C.A.'s publishing arm, where he signed the Eurythmics. Grainge told me, of signing acts in those days, "All I needed was a Walkman, a park bench, and a checkbook. The rest is bullshit." Mike Caren, a longtime record executive formerly at Warner, told me, "Working with artists and songwriters is the closest you can be to the creative process."

Grainge's early years in the business were a fertile time in music. Punk taught him about the power of a "scene," Grainge's shorthand for the way a musical subculture can fuse with fashion, art, media, and politics to change mainstream culture. As hip-hop, one such scene, emerged in the U.S., Grainge observed how technology, in the form of early samplers and drum machines, could enfranchise artists who lacked access to instruments, music lessons, and studios. The rise of New Wave bands, which eclipsed punk, schooled Grainge in how transient scenes can be. One minute he was getting spit on by lads in ripped tees, "and then I wake up and I'm with Steve Strange"—the dandyish front man of the band Visage—"and all the guys look like girls. And the saliva is gone." That's why he wasn't alarmed, years later, when streaming disrupted the industry. "I feel exactly the same with music in the cloud. Everything's disruption, disruption, change, change. I'm used to disruption."

By the early eighties, formerly independent labels that were run by their founders—such as Chris Blackwell's Island and Ahmet Ertegun's Atlantic—had begun to attract Wall Street interest, thanks in part to the enormous success of records like Peter Frampton's double album "Frampton Comes Alive!," on A&M. Labels began merging, to increase market share, offset distribution costs, and spread risk. In 1986, Grainge joined PolyGram, a Dutch-German entertainment company that had expanded into the U.S. and the U.K., to launch a publishing division. He acquired the rights to the catalogues of artists like Elton John, recognizing how valuable copyrights would be in the burgeoning CD era, with the repackaging of older work. That acumen would prove crucial in the streaming age, as catalogues replaced new hits as the primary source of income; one report showed that catalogues represented about seventy per cent of the U.S. music market in 2021.

Toward the end of his publishing career, Grainge was involved in one of the most renowned catalogue rejuvenations ever. In 1992, PolyGram released "ABBA Gold," a greatest-hits collection. After the band split up, in 1982, "we thought it was finished," Björn Ulvaeus, who wrote the Swedish foursome's songs with Benny Andersson, told me. "I really believed that. Oh, they might play the odd song, with a reference to the seventies, perhaps, but that's it." Grainge, working with his colleagues John Kennedy and David Hockman, was instrumental in rebranding the band for a new generation. "It became a huge hit," Ulvaeus said of "ABBA Gold." "I have to thank those guys. They saw something else."

The following January, Grainge moved over to the label side, becoming the head of A. & R. and business affairs at Polydor, a PolyGram label. It had done well with the Bee Gees in the seventies but now had a roster of waning artists. Grainge helped turn things around by signing acts like the Cure, Take That, the Cardigans, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. But it was when he was at Polydor that Grainge's private life was torn apart, after his wife, Samantha Berg, suffered an amniotic-fluid embolism while giving birth to Elliot. "In the space of an hour, I lost my wife and became a father for the first time," he told me. "It's the worst thing that could happen to someone. I had a son to raise, and that became my priority. I became braver. In my professional life, I suppose it enabled me to confront challenges as well as risk with a different mindset, in a way I might not otherwise have had."

In 1997, he became the managing director, a job transition that Grainge now considers the most daunting in his career. At the time, CD sales were driving the industry to new heights, and record companies were growing ever larger. In 1995, the Canadian conglomerate Seagram, led by Edgar Bronfman, Jr., an heir to the Seagram's liquor fortune, had acquired the MCA Music Entertainment Group, and the following year renamed the company Universal Music Group. Two years later, Seagram bought PolyGram. In 2000, Seagram was sold to the French media company Vivendi. Grainge rode this merry-go-round of mergers and acquisitions to greater power. Bronfman appointed him head of Universal Music U.K. in 2001, and he took over UMG International in 2005. Unfortunately, his ascendancy came just as the industry that he had grown up with was facing extinction.

In the fifteen years after the pioneering file-sharing service Napster launched, in 1999, worldwide music revenues declined more than forty per cent. Thousands of people lost their jobs. In 2004, Grainge assembled his senior executives in the company's boardroom in London. He sat in silence until they all were seated, and then he got up and switched off the lights. "This is what's going to happen to the company unless you get some hits and fucking fix file-sharing," he said, and walked out. (Bono, who had heard about this famous meeting, did his Grainge impersonation when he gave his account: "Roight! Get used to the dahk!")

Per Sundin, a record executive in Sweden, recalled meeting Grainge in 2009: "I said, 'We're firing people like crazy, and there's no upside coming.' And Lucian was totally positive. His confidence—about music, songs, and songwriters, but also about the future—was contagious. This is a guy who doesn't fear anyone."

In 2007, Grainge and Nokia made one of the first "all you can eat" music deals: buy the phone and download as much UMG music as you want for a year. Such deals are now the norm. "The fact is that much of the industry was scared to make the shift to an access model," he told me. "And I understand why. When your whole existence has been based on a wholesale retail-transaction model, a fundamental shift like that can be terrifying."

Daniel Ek, of Spotify, met Grainge the same year. "A lot of people at that time were trying to protect their jobs," Ek told me. "But Lucian's view was, How do I protect music, regardless of what happens to me?" Ek believed that a free, ad-supported model for music streaming would act as a "funnel" to bring in users and then convert them to paying subscribers, through premium features. But free music was a non-starter for Edgar Bronfman, who by then was C.E.O. of Warner Music Group. (In 2004, Bronfman had led a group of investors who acquired WMG from Time Warner.) "Free streaming services are clearly not net positive for the industry, and, as far as Warner Music is concerned, will not be licensed," he said at the time.

Grainge didn't love the idea of free music, either. Yet he supported Ek's vision, and was instrumental in getting Spotify licensed in the U.S., in 2011. But the free tier remained contentious (and still is). Ek recalled a particularly difficult negotiation a few years later over renewing the license, which was set to expire. "I was running up against the clock, both sides were threatening each other, and I was kind of getting stressed out," Ek told me. His partner, Sofia Levander, was about to give birth to their first child. "Lucian called me up," he went on. "I was expecting him to scream at me, 'You've got twenty-four hours!' But what he actually said was, 'I just heard that you're about to become a father. I've been in this situation myself, where it was really difficult in my professional career. You know what, I'm just going to renew the existing deal as is for two months. Go have your baby, take it easy, we will sort it out somehow.' He had no financial reason for doing that. In fact, it would probably have been better for him to wear me out while I was going through a lot of hardship." He added, "And when I came back we sat together and worked it out."

Bronfman recently described the tough stance that he took with Ek in the early days of streaming. "I said, 'Look, Daniel, you will have people on the free tier forever—that's just not right,'" he told me. But, he added, "Lucian was more the leader and I was the outlier." Grainge's approach to A.I. today, Bronfman believes, is "very consistent" with his initial approach to streaming. "He has always wanted to enable technologies," Bronfman said. "He doesn't want to shut them down, but he doesn't want to give them entirely free rein until he has a better understanding of their potential, either to grow or harm the industry."

In 2011, Grainge became the head of global UMG, which was based in New York, after spending six months as co-C.E.O. with Doug Morris. He decided to relocate the company to L.A., in part to be closer to Silicon Valley, and in part to establish a new power base away from New York and Morris's loyalists. Although the unique cultures of the formerly independent labels had mostly disappeared by the twenty-first century, Grainge, like Morris before him, sought to revive the entrepreneurial spirit that made them successful in the first place, encouraging UMG label heads to compete not only with outside labels but with one another. He told me that he had learned from Obie the importance of "surrounding oneself with brilliant creative executives," and that "they needed to be treated like artists themselves." Interscope's John Janick, whom Grainge helped bring in to succeed Jimmy Iovine, told me, "I'm an employee here, but he makes me feel like I'm building the company I run."

Eleven months into his tenure as UMG's chairman, Grainge made a huge wager on the future of music and on his own career. EMI, the British music conglomerate—home to the Beatles and Queen—had gone bankrupt after a disastrous sale of its assets to Guy Hands, a British private-equity investor who thought that he knew how to run a record company.

In what could now be called one of the biggest bargains of all time, Grainge bought the company from Citibank for $1.9 billion. Competitors raised antitrust concerns; Congress held a hearing, where Bronfman said that the merger would create "one innovation-stifling dominant player"; and the European Commission issued a two-hundred-page statement of objection. Citibank sold EMI's publishing arm to Sony. Grainge sold some of the labels, including Ensign, his brother Nigel's former label, to appease the regulators. (Nigel died in 2017, at the age of seventy, owing to complications from surgery.)

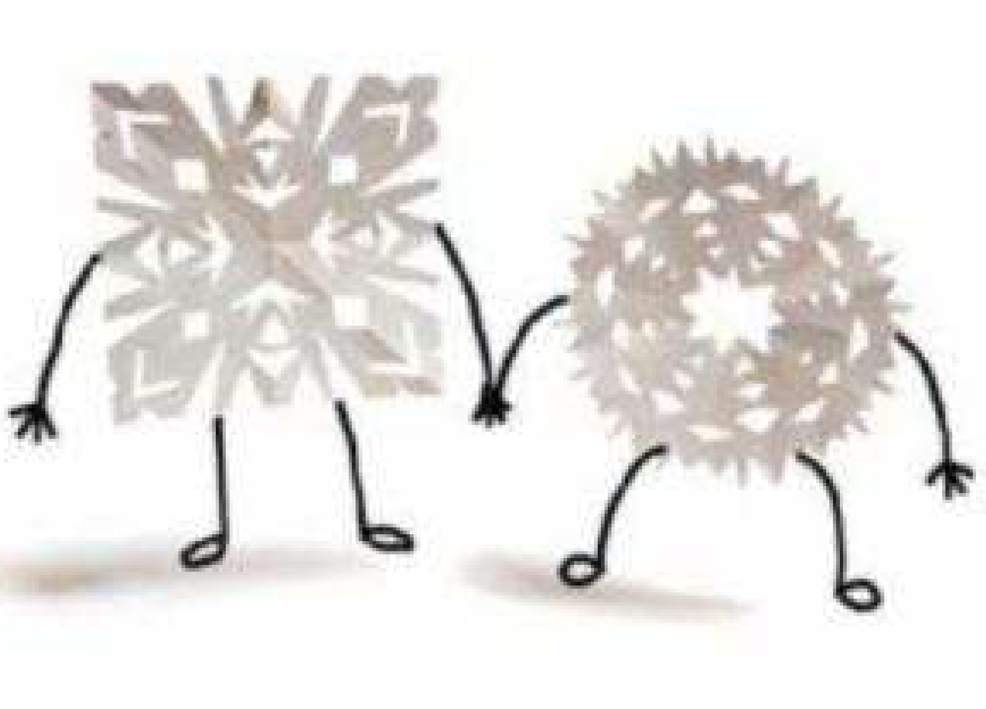
"I would take 'innovation stifling' out," Bronfman said, when I asked him how he felt about his testimony today.

UMG's larger market share enhanced Grainge's leverage with the tech companies. When it comes to a wriggle, scale matters. "I'm negotiating with companies whose value runs into the trillions," Grainge told me. "In that sense, we're a minnow." He forged the first licensing deal between a major record company and a social platform, when he entered into an agreement with Facebook, in 2017. In the past decade, YouTube, Snapchat, Amazon, Peloton, and any number of gaming companies, fitness apps, and purveyors of online karaoke have come to Grainge seeking licensing deals. "I was around for some of that," Neil Jacobson, a former president of Geffen Records, which is part of Interscope, told me. "It's the greatest negotiation in the history of the music business. He knew how to play one against the other." Azoff observed, "He deserves full credit for knocking down these walls and making them start dealing with us, but he would be the first to say the fight's far from over."

Grainge starts each year with a memo to the UMG staff—the music-industry equivalent of Warren Buffett's annual letter to his shareholders. His January, 2023, epistle to UMG's ten thousand employees began with chest thumping over the company's domination of the charts, with tracks by Taylor Swift, the Weeknd, Feid, Karol G, Lana Del Rey, Morgan Wallen, Olivia Rodrigo, the Rolling Stones, and Drake, who on the 2021 Migos song "Having Our Way" dropped the chairman's name:

> Shit done changed
> Billionaires talk to me different
> When they see my paystub from Lucian
> Grainge.

Then Grainge turned to "content oversupply," as he referred to it. In spite of the popularity of the company's superstars (several of the most followed people on social media are Universal artists), UMG's over-all share of the streaming market is declining, as is that of the other label groups. A decade ago, according to a study published by Bank of America, major labels were responsible for about ninety per cent of the content on streaming platforms; today, their share is roughly ten per cent. YouTube and TikTok have allowed emerging artists to monetize their careers without major-label help. Ice Spice, Jack Harlow, and Lil Nas X, for instance, owe their ascendancy to social media.



Grainge grew up in an industry in which labels were the only game in town. Now the platforms are clogged with aspiring musicians, hoping that an algorithm will notice them. In a report last year, the research company Luminate said that, of the hundred and eighty-four million tracks available on streaming platforms, 86.2 per cent received fewer than a thousand plays, and 24.8 per cent—45.6 million tracks—had zero plays. It seems that Spotify, which in many ways could be considered the Netflix of music, has also become something like Friendster: a place for amateurs to post homemade work for friends.

In Grainge's view, this oversupply is "getting in the way of real talent and real songwriters," he told me. Many of the hundred and twenty thousand new tracks flooding into streaming platforms each day aren't songs at all; they're "functional music" designed for exercising, concentrating, or sleeping, including such bangers as "Baby White Noise" and "Rain on Windshield." Endel, a prominent functional-music company, has estimated that there are as many as fifteen billion streams of these tracks a month. In our conversations, Grainge pointed to a vacuum sound that had recently risen to No. 7 on the Swiss music charts. A.I. was likely to vastly increase what he called the "sea of noise." (In May, 2023, in another kind of wriggle, Grainge himself entered the market, when UMG announced a partnership with Endel that would allow UMG artists to use A.I. to make functional versions of their songs.)

The payment system that was being used by Spotify and other platforms—a pro-rata model that Grainge helped create—paid a share of the aggregate royalties to labels based on the percentage of the total that their artists' streams represented. The labels were then responsible for paying out the artists' share. It galled Grainge that all streams were valued the same, whether it was Drake or a dripping faucet. A pro-rata model also didn't account for the added value of major acts, which drive people to pay, and stay subscribed to, premium streaming services. As Monte Lipman put it to me, "With these superstar artists, when they set a release date, you see these sharp spikes in the streaming space, and you don't necessarily see that with rainwater hitting the windshield."

In his letter, Grainge called for a new

SILO

Whoever is the one to ladder up
Never has to say why: the sky his,
And in his climb keeps the necessary close

As below we appear useless. We auger the heart
Of the sealed-off pit, check each step;
What might go wrong before it does,

Work the edge from the inside, the lowest
Door to open last. What does he already know
Looking down to find the pattern, the mistake,

In bad rain, in sudden mud or winter sun—I cannot tell
What I need to tell; us, still in our noise, whine
Of motor upon motor, and his arm waving in shortcut

Which never waits for our answer; each day time
Paid out by our churn, our small corrections.

—*Sophie Cabot Black*

"artist-centric" model that would value legitimate artists at a higher rate. It is a measure of his clout that by the time his 2024 letter came out, in early January, Spotify and several other platforms were adopting key aspects of this model. The French streaming service Deezer, for example, now counts an instance of someone searching for and listening to a song—rather than listening after it has been served up by an algorithm—as two streams. On Spotify, tracks must have a thousand plays in a year before they can start generating revenue. "Is it fair?" Daniel Glass, who heads the indie label Glassnote, said. "No. But Lucian did the right thing for the music industry."

I asked Grainge how he could be sure that one of those hundred and twenty thousand new songs that crop up every day might not be the next hit.

"How are you going to find that?" he said. "There's too much stuff! And it is just stuff."

In June of 2023, Mohan arranged for a demonstration of the nascent Lyria for Grainge and several members of his team, at Grainge's home. Prompted by a text command, Lyria generated an instrumental version of the melody of Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe" in the style of John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things." It was impressive, but Grainge wasn't surprised. He had seen this kind of thing before, back in the early eighties, when synthesizers, samplers, and drum machines became especially popular. "Everyone said it was the end back then," he observed.

Michael Nash, UMG's chief digital officer, and Will Tanous, the chief administrative officer, attended the meeting. "I don't mean to be a wet blanket," Tanous said after the demo ended, "but there's a huge section of the artist community that won't be down with this." Musicians were growing anxious about what A.I. might do to their careers.

YouTube and UMG discussed the idea of an "artist incubator." Songwriters, performers, producers, and rights holders would experiment with the technology and give Google feedback, including any concerns. By August, the incubator was up and running. Participants included Don Was, Björn Ulvaeus, the artist Rosanne Cash, the composer Max Richter, the rapper Yo Gotti, the OneRepublic front man Ryan Tedder, and representatives of the estate of Frank Sinatra.

In October, Don Was told me about his session with Lyria. He prompted the model with the name of a famous artist, a legendary singer-songwriter he had worked with in the past, asking for a song about his first car. The DeepMind team suggested adding the command "produced by Don Was." The A.I. generated four different fragments of songs about cars, all with lyrics, melodies, and orchestration, and sung in the A.I.-generated voice of the artist, which had been learned from YouTube videos. Was described the experience as "a combination of awe and terror simultaneously." His first thought was "This is better than anything I could have done." His second was "I could collaborate with myself on my very best day." For that reason, he told himself, "the songwriters are going to like this more than anybody, as long as you can't steal from them." He imagines an A.I. that has been trained on an artist's complete works, and which other songwriters could collaborate with, for a fee. The songwriter, he mused, "gets paid, and he can put his name on the song if he likes it, take it off if he doesn't."

DeepMind representatives met with Ulvaeus in Stockholm; he later spent a day at DeepMind, in London. "I can only describe it as an extension of my mind," Ulvaeus told me. I quoted Was's line about writing with yourself on your "very best day." "Exactly," Ulvaeus replied. He talked about hearing the Beatles on the radio as a young man. "We kind of trained on that," he said. "And, when we started writing, all of those references—we used them for inspiration." But the A.I. would be able to reference so much more than he had. "Every songwriter in the world would subscribe to that service if it was good enough," he said. He'd also started to think about monetization. "The A.I. models would have a heap of money like Spotify does, and that money could be distributed back to songwriters and labels according to consumption," he suggested, adding, "It's a blunt instrument, but that's one way of doing it."

It's possible that questions over copyright and monetization could take years to sort out. By that point, the A.I. version of an artist might not need her anymore, once it has learned everything there is to learn about her style. And who would own the output: the prompter of the A.I. or the artist whose style was the inspiration? "I have to accept that the prompter gets a copyright," Ulvaeus said. "It sounds radical, but I see no other way."

But why was training a song-generating A.I. like Lyria any different from the way that he and Benny Andersson had drawn on their memories of listening to the Beatles in making their hits? Because, as Ulvaeus pointed out to me, the Beatles music that they heard was licensed and paid for.

When I asked Grainge whether licensing the music used for training A.I.s was the way forward, he offered an automobile analogy. "If only it were as simple as buying a car: 'This is what the manufacturing cost is, this is what the taxes are,'" he said. "This is more like *building* a car, so it's far too early for me to discuss business models." He added, "But it's in my bones to try and be ahead."

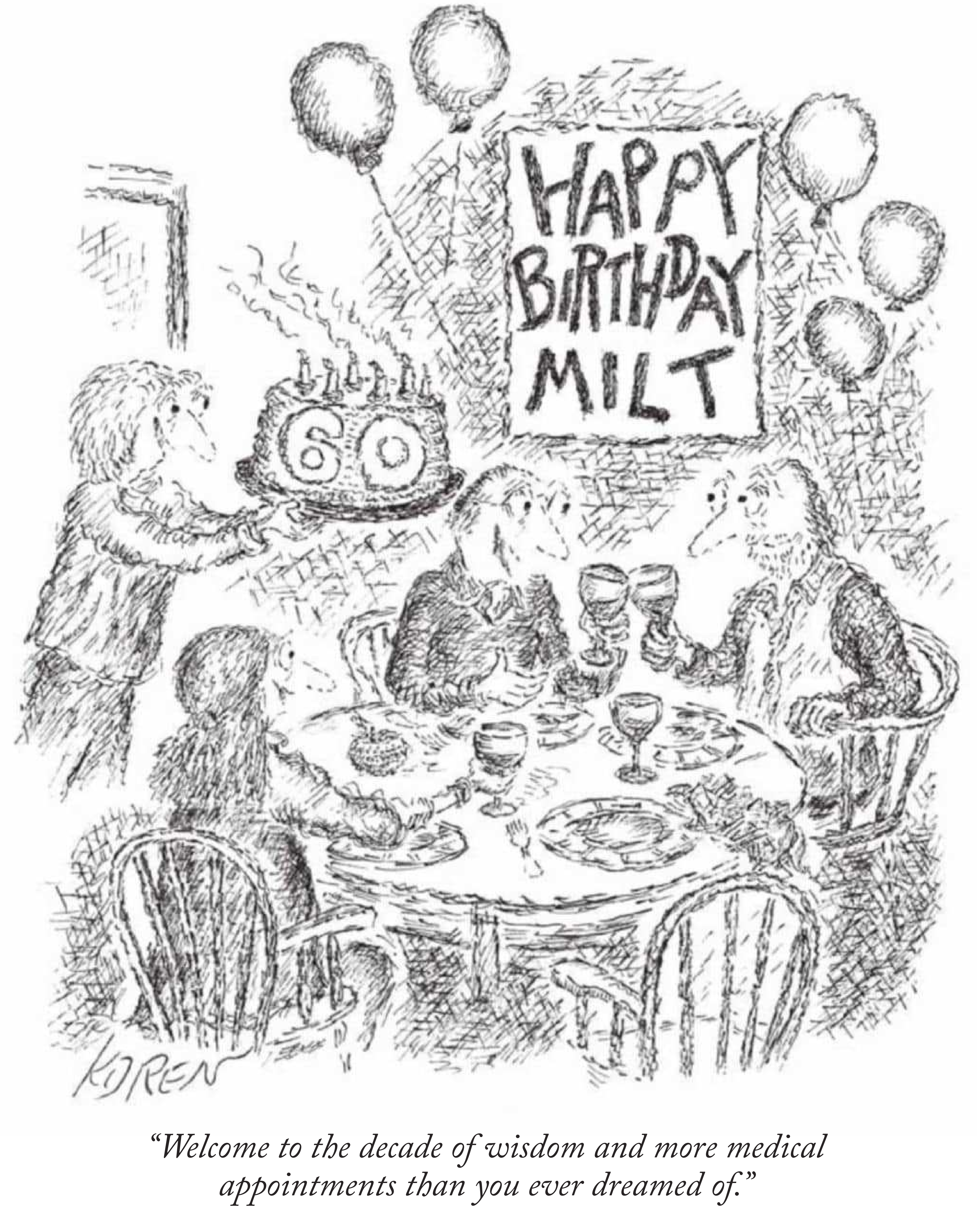
When I met with Grainge in California, YouTube was about to announce an experimental venture called Dream Track. A select group of a hundred YouTube creators would get to use the A.I.-generated voices and songwriting styles of nine well-known singer-songwriters, three of them from UMG—John Legend, Demi Lovato, and Troye Sivan—to create YouTube Shorts of up to thirty seconds. Four Warner artists would also be involved: Alec Benjamin, Charlie Puth, Charli XCX, and Sia. And the rappers Yo Gotti and Papoose rounded out the group. As Lyor Cohen, YouTube's global music head, explained in a blog post about the experiment, the creators would simply have to type an idea into the creation prompt and select one of the artists from a carrousel in order to produce a unique soundtrack for their Shorts.

For Grainge, Dream Track represented an unusually bold collaboration between a content colossus and a tech superpower, in an effort to determine how to monetize synthetic vocals. Among other possible applications, Grainge was curious how the technology could be used to create new iterations of hit songs which would be sung in different languages by A.I.-generated versions of the artists' voices. In the U.S., artists own their voices and likenesses, which are protected not by copyright but by the "right of publicity." After Fake Drake appeared, last April, people were using services like Voicify to flood streaming platforms with tracks that replicated artists' voices and songwriting styles without permission. UMG issued thousands of takedown notices, but efforts were complicated because right-of-publicity statutes exist only at the state level. UMG has lobbied Congress for a federal right of publicity, and a recent bipartisan bill, the No AI Fraud Act, aims to protect artists' voices under federal intellectual-property law. "I personally think legislation is critical," Grainge told me. He sees the unlicensed use of A.I.-generated voices and styles "as a form of identity theft." It's "immoral," he said.

One day, Grainge invited me to tag along to a meeting with his "creative SWAT team" to discuss both Dream Track and the artist incubator. In a conference room called ABBA—each meeting room in the building is named for a famous UMG artist or act—seven men and one woman were waiting at a long table, with the empty chair at the head reserved for Grainge. He began by noting that this was a limited experiment. Rigid controls were in place so that the users couldn't, say, prompt the John Legend A.I. to sing a hymn to terrorists. The output is closely monitored by YouTube and watermarked using SynthID.

"Sometimes you need a Snickers bar to get to the filet mignon, to stop you from driving into a concrete pillar and killing yourself along the way," Grainge remarked, in a typically tortured analogy. He was particularly concerned that a superstar artist might object to UMG's involvement in a generative-A.I. experiment with Google. Bad Bunny had recently declared, to fans listening to an unauthorized deepfake track that used his voice, "You don't deserve to be my friends."

Grainge went on, "I can just hear it—'I don't fuck with A.I.!'" He added,



"Welcome to the decade of wisdom and more medical appointments than you ever dreamed of."

"We have to be ready. Let's not be afraid. Let's just be prepared."

The discussion turned to the incubator. Dickon Stainer, UMG's global head of classical music and jazz, who was joining the meeting by Zoom from London, reported that his artist Max Richter was delighted to be invited into the incubator. "He's been through all the format changes, from albums to CDs, CDs to downloads, downloads to streaming, and he feels he was powerless to affect any of that," Stainer said. "And all of a sudden he feels like he can be in the middle of the conversation."

It was late in London. "Do you have your p.j.'s on under that shirt, Dickon?" Grainge called out, with a laugh. "The ones with the little animals on them?"

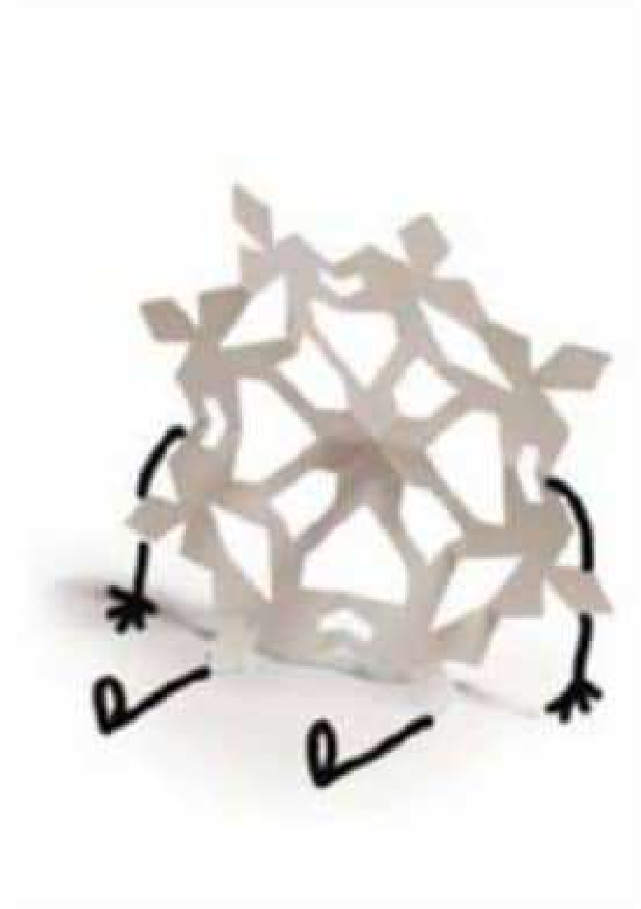
"I've been out to a gig!" Stainer replied.

Grainge wrapped up the meeting with a couple more metaphors. "I don't think this will be plain sailing," he said. "It's like going to the dentist. 'If you experience any pain, let me know and I'll stop immediately.' That's what this is."

The larger question of whether copyrighted material can be used as training data for A.I. is far from settled. In October, Universal Music Publishing Group and other prominent publishers sued the A.I. company Anthropic—the creator of Claude, a "next generation AI assistant for your tasks, no matter the scale"—for systematic and widespread infringement of copyrighted material in the training of Claude and in its potential output. Both sides submitted written responses to the U.S. Copyright Office on several topics, including fair use and copyright. Anthropic maintains that its A.I. uses a vast body of work, of which lyrics are one small element, to build a statistical model of the way language functions.

In reference to the overarching challenges posed by generative A.I., UMG argued in its submission to the Copyright Office that "the wholesale appropriation of UMG's enormous catalog of copyright-protected sound recordings and musical compositions to build multibillion commercial enterprises . . . is simply theft on an unprecedented scale." Jonathan King, a copyright lawyer who worked on the submission, told me, "One of the principles of fair use is that authors ought to be allowed to build upon the work of other authors in some circumstances. But that's not how A.I. works. A.I. uses copyrighted materials to emulate human authorship. The machine is not an author, in the traditional sense of a creative and expressive human being, because it is just synthesizing an imitation of human content, derived from algorithms that study and try to sound like human authors."

Grainge wasn't waiting for the courts to decide what constitutes fair use. Recalling the first decade of file-sharing, he said, "If we had waited for the tech companies to finish innovating, we would have ended up as roadkill."



"I'm never really apprehensive about anything," Grainge told me of his exploratory A.I. ventures. I had raised the question of whether he could really trust Google, since the company's long-term interests may lie in giving its users the tools to close the gap between wannabes and real artists by making it possible for anyone to create a fully orchestrated song by typing in a prompt or even whistling a melody. A tsunami of noise could be coming.

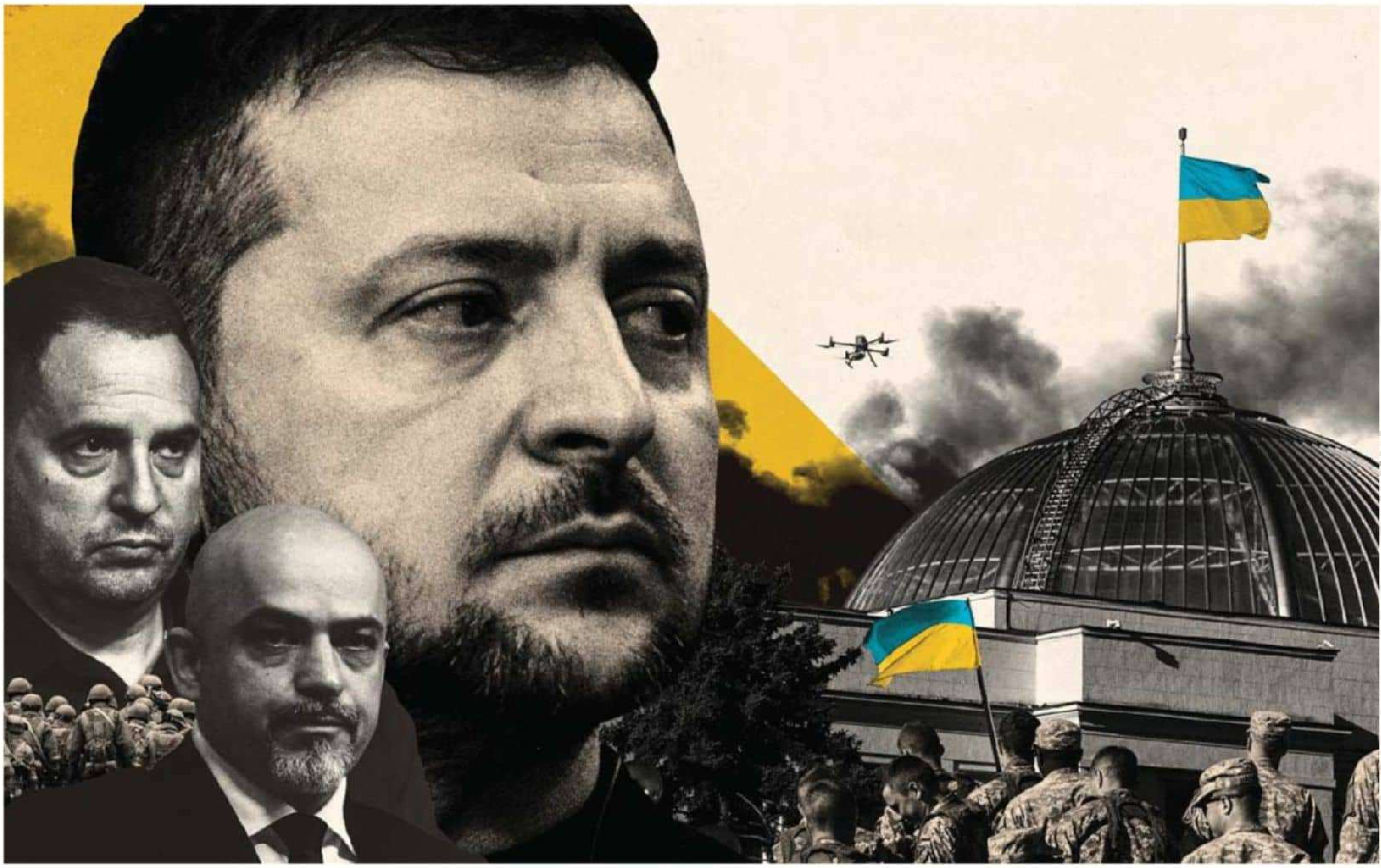
Grainge doesn't indulge in such existential fears. "The things that make me apprehensive," he said, "are when people can't see around the corners and the bends." He made the swimming motion with his hand again. "Technology has served the industry very well," he went on. "From sheet music to upright pianos to big bands and the huge CBS radio network in the U.S. that was going to destroy fledging shellac sales. In the eighties, Linn drum machines, 808s, the Fairlight synthesizer—we've always been served very well." In any case, he added, there was no point in fighting generative A.I. "What are we going to do?" When a company the size of Google is "making an investment in developing products and tools," he said, "my view is, as an industry, we need to be the hostess with the mostest."

Grainge mentioned new health-and-wellness projects that UMG was pursuing with a couple of startups, according to research on how music affects the brain. "If you've ever been in a ward with brain-injury patients, as I have, unfortunately," Grainge said, pausing for a second before continuing, "the music-therapy person is like the guy in a Mexican restaurant who goes around and plays at your table. I thought, How can we use the technology—headphones, earbuds, and software—to program inaudible frequencies into the music for the region of the frontal lobes that affects pain and reduce stress? And I think we've got it. I believe that we've got a product that over a twelve-minute period will be as effective as a valium." He added, "It's brilliant for catalogue—that's the businessman in me. But it also shows the importance of music to the world. It is emotionally healing as well as physically healing."

Had Grainge's brush with death at the beginning of the pandemic informed his view of life, work, or the threat of A.I.? Had he answered the question "Why me?" "I'm not a particularly spiritual person," he said. "I care about music, I care about artists, I care deeply, deeply, deeply about this industry. That was the impact the illness had." After another pause, he added, "You know, the reality is, we're no more than a speck of sand. All of us."

"The last time I spoke to Lucian," Bono told me, "he was going on about Africa: 'It's so exciting! All these new artists!' He was looking at talent in Nigeria." By 2050, more than a third of the world's youth will live on the African continent.

When the African music scene came up in our conversation, Grainge got so worked up that he seemed like he might pogo off his chair. "A dancehall record coming out of Lagos—to an old-fart talent scout like me, this is wonderful," he said. His ears were up. "Because they're scenes. And then they start to cross-pollinate. It's the greatest feeling when you've placed a song with an artist, or you've seen a band and there's fifty people, then one hundred and fifty people, then three hundred people. It's the greatest feeling in the world." ♦



A REPORTER AT LARGE

DEMOCRACY IN DARKNESS

What Ukraine has already lost in its fight against Russia.

BY MASHA GESSEN

Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity began, according to legend, with a Facebook post. In the fall of 2013, after President Viktor Yanukovych backed out of a deal that would have deepened the country's relationship with the European Union, the investigative journalist Mustafa Nayyem wrote a post calling on people to gather in Independence Square, in the center of Kyiv. After three months of continuous protests, Yanukovych fled to Russia. Ten years later, Independence Square is desolate most days. Kyiv has imposed a midnight curfew. Martial law, in effect since February, 2022, when Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, forbids mass gatherings. As for Nayyem, he is now the head of the federal agency for reconstruction, which is attempting to rebuild the country as quickly as the Russians are devastating it. On the tenth anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity, this past November, instead of speaking at a rally, Nayyem was scheduled to preside over a different sort of ceremony: the reopening of a bridge that connects Kyiv to the western suburbs of Bucha and Irpin, where, in the first weeks of the war, some of the worst atrocities committed by Russian forces took place.

A few days before the unveiling, I talked with Nayyem in his office. The reconstruction agency occupies part of a stolid late-Soviet government building. Nayyem's suite looks as though it was renovated ambitiously but on a budget, with vertical blinds, plastic panelling, and vinyl knockoffs of Le Corbusier couches in the waiting area. On the walls he had hung giant prints of the famous "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper" photograph and a panoramic view of Manhattan. "New York is my favorite city," he explained. "And this is as close as I'm going to get to it in the foreseeable future."

Nayyem was born in Kabul in 1981, the second year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. His mother died three years later, after giving birth to his brother, Masi. When Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan, in 1989,

"I've spent almost two years living entirely in the present," a sociologist on active duty says. "It eats up all your energy."

Nayyem's father, a former government official, moved to Moscow. Two years later, after marrying a Ukrainian woman, he moved the family to Kyiv. Nayyem rose to prominence in his twenties as a crusading journalist, uncovering stories of top-level government graft in Ukraine. Following the Revolution of Dignity, he served in parliament and played a key role in reforming Ukraine's notoriously corrupt and violent police force. Before accepting his current job, he was a deputy minister for infrastructure.

The government launched the reconstruction agency last January, with the announcement that eighteen apartment buildings would be restored in Irpin, where an estimated seventy per cent of the civilian infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed. "We are all in a rush to give people hope," Nayyem told me. "But that obscures the fact that we are a country at war. Our only real goal is to survive." He was about to leave for a gruelling trip, travelling by car to the southern port city of Odesa to look at the damage sustained in recent attacks, and then to liberated territories in the southeast to begin a pilot project in which an entire village is being rebuilt. "You go to Kharkiv and realize that a bridge that's been blown up means it takes three extra hours to get from one point to another," Nayyem said. "That can mean the difference between life and death."

Nayyem's brother, Masi, was injured in combat early in the war, and brought to a hospital in critical condition. The car carrying him travelled over a stretch of highway that was later damaged. It has since been repaired by Nayyem's agency. "We have to rebuild even if it's going to be destroyed again," he said. "We have no choice." It's building for the present, not for the future.

A new saying had taken hold in Ukraine: "None of us is coming back from this war." People may emigrate or relocate, but the war is here to stay. The saying has a literal meaning, too: of the hundreds of thousands of people who enlisted in the early days of the invasion, only the most severely injured have been granted a discharge. In October, about a hundred protesters defied martial law and gathered in Kyiv to demand a limit on the amount of time a person can be expected to serve. The exact number of people currently on military duty, like the number of casualties and target numbers for conscription, is secret. In August, President Volodymyr Zelensky had fired the heads of all the regional draft offices, so pervasive was corruption in the system—and so high, apparently, the desire to buy one's way out of being conscripted. Nevertheless, officials continue to hand out draft notices. In December, it emerged that the ministry of defense was working on a plan to start drafting Ukrainians living abroad.

Until a few months ago, everyone in Ukraine seemed to know how the war would end: Ukraine would liberate its territory, including Crimea, and this, it was assumed, would burst the Russian propaganda bubble and bring about the collapse of Vladimir Putin's regime. But then the long-anticipated Ukrainian counter-offensive, which began last spring, failed to achieve any meaningful breakthroughs. Russia still holds about twenty per cent of what was previously Ukrainian territory. Now, when I asked Nayyem about the end

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCIERO

of the war, he said, "I'm afraid to think about it." He went on, "I don't know what it would mean for the war to be over. I think that in my lifetime there will not be a time when I won't fear that war may start again any minute. Because Russia is not going anywhere."

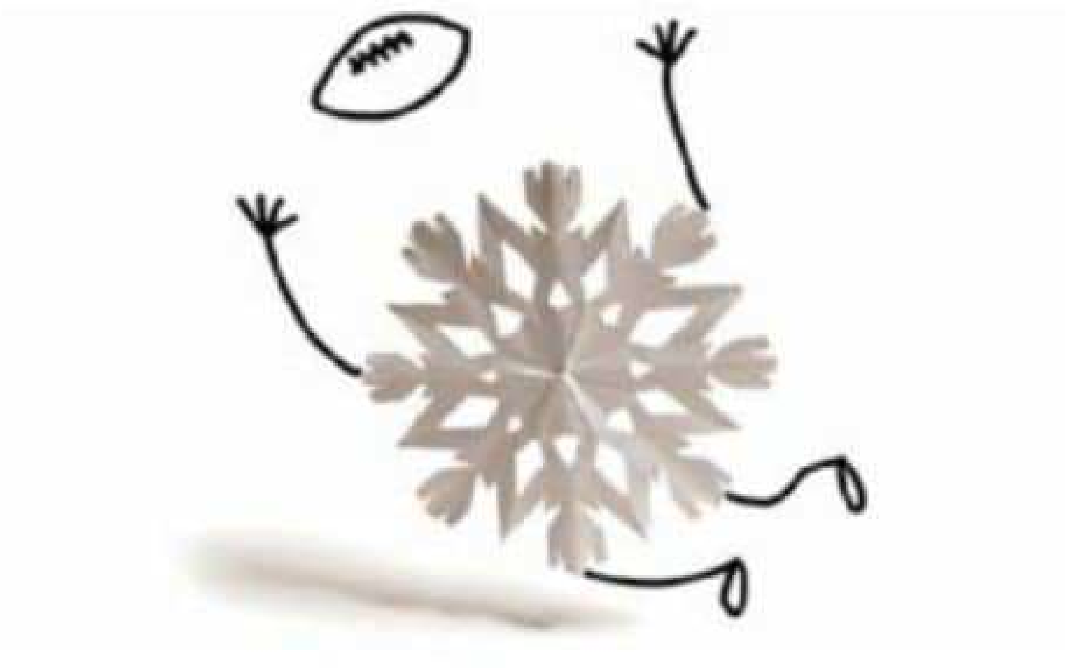
I heard similar notes of weariness from countless others. "What are we fighting for—land?" Katerina Sergatskova, a prominent journalist who started a safety-training program for members of the media, told me. "We say that we'll keep fighting until the Russian empire falls apart. But it's not going to fall apart." Denys Kobzin, a sociologist from Kharkiv who is on active military duty, told me that, before the war, he used to attend classes on how to live in the moment. "Now I've spent almost two years living entirely in the present," he said. "It eats up all your energy. You can't dream, you can't immerse yourself in memories, you are always a little bit 'on.' This life of total uncertainty—it's like you went out for a run but you don't know how far you are running. Sometimes you have to speed up, but mostly you just need to keep breathing."

In November, the former NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who had long tried to help bring about peace negotiations, suggested that NATO might accept a Ukraine that didn't include the territories currently occupied by Russia. Such an arrangement could effectively turn the front line into a border and end the fighting without opening negotiations with the Russians. Nayyem thought the suggestion was reasonable—after all, following the Second World War, West Germany became a NATO member while the East was still occupied by the Soviet Union. "You know what was good about the Second World War?" Nayyem asked wistfully. "It ended!"

As it turned out, Nayyem's unveiling ceremony was overshadowed by a different news story. Andriy Odarchenko, a parliament member from Zelensky's party, was detained for allegedly attempting to bribe Nayyem. According to prosecutors, Odarchenko had offered Nayyem an incentive to channel reconstruction funds to a university in Kharkiv that Odarchenko had been selected to head. Nayyem had alerted anticorruption authorities, who set up a sting. Once it appeared that Odarchenko had secured the funding, Nayyem received about ten thousand dollars in bitcoin as a kickback. Odarchenko was arrested minutes before a scheduled meeting of the parliament's anti-corruption committee, of which he was a member. (He has pleaded innocent.)

Such was the state of Ukraine as it entered its third consecutive winter at war: still battling the demon of corruption, still defiant, yet visibly reduced, palpably tired. Nayyem feared that, if the war went on long enough, Ukraine would become more like Russia: autocratic, corrupt, nihilistic. "Russia is Russia because Russia is 'fighting Nazis,'" he said, referring to Putin's false pretense for the war. "And we risk becoming Russia because we are actually fighting Nazis."

It is a commonplace to say that Ukraine is waging a war not only for its survival but for the future of democracy in Europe and beyond. In the meantime, in Ukraine, democracy is largely suspended. According to the regular order of things, Ukraine should have a Presidential election in March. Up until the end of November—a few weeks before the deadline for scheduling the election—Zelensky's office seemed open to having one, but ultimately decided against it. "We shouldn't have elections, because elections always create disunity," Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former defense minister who now advises the government, told me. "We need to be unified."

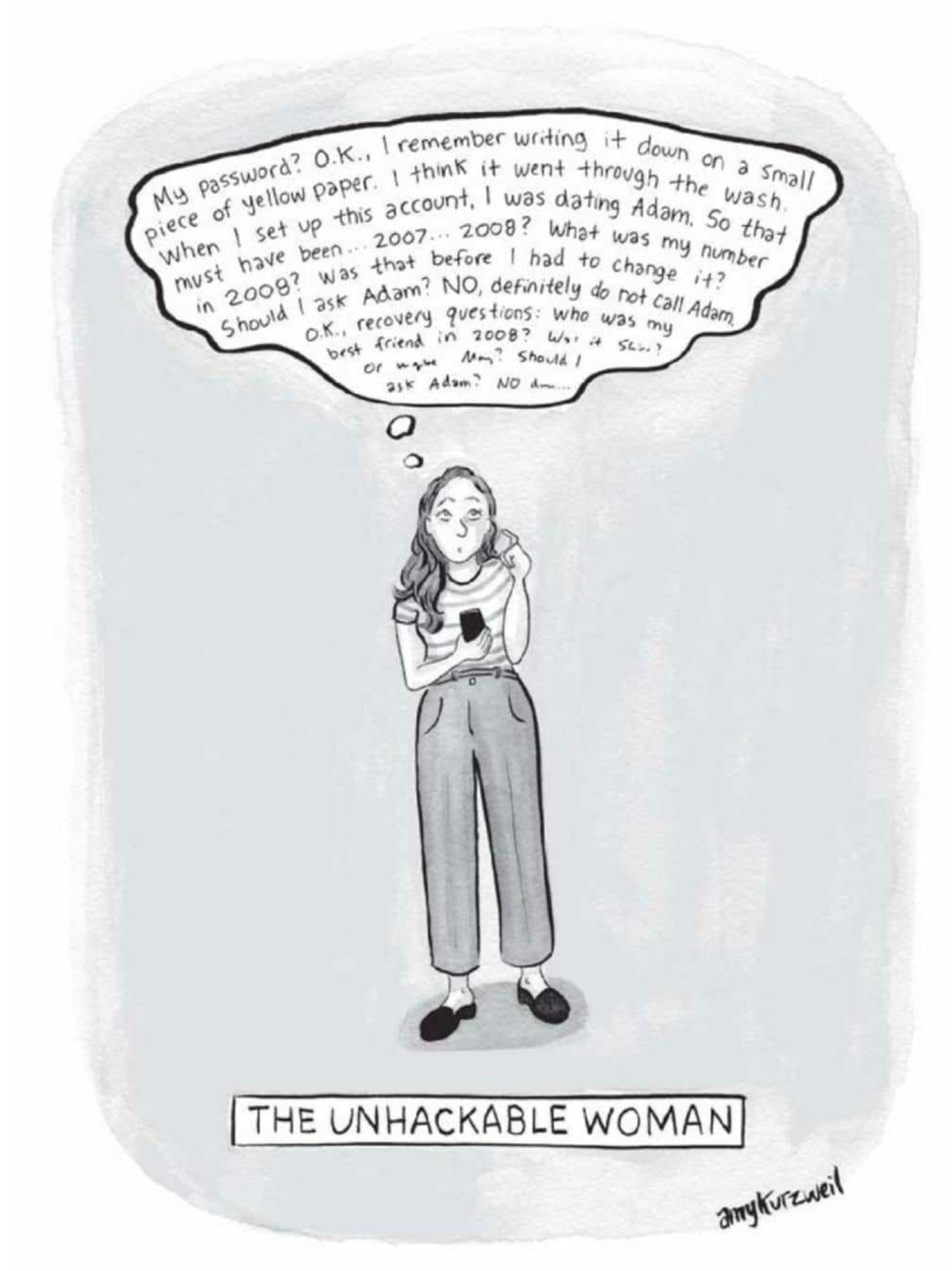


An estimated four to six million Ukrainians are living under Russian occupation. At least four million are living in E.U. countries, a million more are living in Russia, and at least half a million are living elsewhere outside of Ukraine. Another four million have been internally displaced. These figures include a significant number of people who became adults after the war began and aren't registered to vote. "Elections are a public discussion," Oleksandra Romantsova, the executive director of Ukraine's Center for Civil Liberties, which shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, told me. "But a third of the population is connected with the military. Another third is displaced." With so many people excluded from the public discussion, what would an election even mean? There is also a more practical problem, Romantsova said: "Elections cause people to congregate," and, when Ukrainians congregate, Russia bombs them.

The current government was never meant to last. Zelensky, a former comedian who starred in a sitcom about a schoolteacher who guilelessly rides a wave of anti-establishment sentiment into the office of the President, was elected at a moment when Ukrainians wanted someone, perhaps anyone, who was not a career politician. He promised to serve for just one term. During the parliamentary election that followed Zelensky's inauguration, in 2019, his Servant of the People Party allowed only first-time candidates to run on its ticket. "New faces only" was the slogan. The party secured two hundred and fifty-four seats out of four hundred and fifty. Now, with elections postponed indefinitely, Zelensky and the generation of people he brought into politics are becoming like the officials they once promised to root out: entrenched.

At the start of the war, when Russia was bombing Kyiv daily, the parliament had to consider the risks of continuing to hold meetings in its building, which has a glass roof. It decided to do so, but to vote only on bills that a majority wanted to bring to the floor, and to limit discussion of amendments. This effectively shifted the center of legislative work to the President's office. Among other bills, the parliament approved the declaration of martial law, introduced by Zelensky on the first day of the war, and has regularly renewed it. Martial law enables the cabinet of ministers to control who can enter and leave the country—since the start of the war, men under the age of sixty have been forbidden to leave—

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY


My password? O.K., I remember writing it down on a small piece of yellow paper. I think it went through the wash. When I set up this account, I was dating Adam. So that must have been... 2007... 2008? What was my number in 2008? Was that before I had to change it? Should I ask Adam? NO, definitely do not call Adam. O.K., recovery questions: who was my best friend in 2008? Was it ... Should I ask Adam? NO ...
THE UNHACKABLE WOMAN
amyKurzweil

and to regulate the work of all media outlets, printing presses, and distribution companies.

Zelensky's office created the United News TV Marathon, a round-the-clock program of war-related news and talk shows, supplanting what had been a vibrant and varied television news market. The segments appear on six of Ukraine's major channels and, at any given time, all of them are showing the same thing. Despite its name, United Marathon was clearly designed to be a sprint. In the early months of the war, the programming had a sense of urgency, of novelty and shock. Now even the worst days—when Russia fires a barrage of rockets that kill civilians across the country—are like all the other terrible days, when people are killed in the same way, in more or less the same places. There is little to analyze anymore. "The one thing all Ukrainians agree on is that we need an end to the Marathon," Romantsova told me.

Other government-controlled media target an international audience. Gleb Gusev, a forty-four-year-old with a shaved head and a trimmed beard, used to run Babel, a highbrow news site. After the invasion, he decided to join the war effort. As part of a forty-person team, he makes social-media videos for United24 Media, a Zelensky initiative aimed at popularizing the Ukrainian government's messages for the English-speaking world. "Putting it harshly, it's propaganda," Gusev told me over coffee at a fashionably folksy café and gallery called Avangarden. "Putting it mildly, it's advertising. Our job is to illustrate whatever message the government wants to convey."

During the summer, Gusev's team promoted Kyiv's vision for a victorious postwar Ukraine. "But then the counteroffensive fizzled and we switched gears," he told me in November. The focus shifted to the woes of importers and exporters, and then to human-interest stories about people affected by the war. United24's YouTube channel has more than nine hundred thousand subscribers; another three hundred and forty thousand follow its Instagram account. "My journalistic instincts rebel," Gusev told me. "But then I think, This work can make a difference."

Martial law has effectively stalled and even reversed some of the most important democratic reforms adopted after the Revolution of Dignity: decentralization and the creation of elected governments that control local budgets. In cities and villages where elected mayors have disappeared, resigned, or been driven out—or, as in the case of Chernihiv, a city in northern Ukraine, been accused of misusing funds and suspended by a court—military administrations have stepped in. (In Chernihiv, the national parliament ultimately intervened on behalf of the civilian government.) The result is a patchwork of governmental authority that varies from region to region and town to town. In November, after months of conflict between military authorities and community councils to control income taxes paid by military personnel, Zelensky signed a law diverting that money into the military budget.

Oleksandr Solontay, a political organizer and a former elected official who has fought efforts to replace civilian rule with military administrations, has questioned whether he should continue his work. "If we are not fighting for democracy, then what are we fighting for?" Solontay told me. At the same time, he went on, Russia is "trying to erase us as a nation. So we have to ask whether we can keep talking about democracy when our very survival as a people is in question. Maybe we shouldn't be wasting our time on issues like inclusion or the rights of minorities, on all the things that make us different from one another. Maybe we should just send everyone to the Army."

For Zelensky, the autumn began badly and ended worse. He and his people have spent most of the war barricaded in the building of the Presidential administration, on Bankova Street in Kyiv. The block is surrounded by military checkpoints. The building itself is mostly dark. Pleated drapes are drawn over stacks of sandbags that cover the windows. In October, a profile in *Time* portrayed Zelensky as exhausted and increasingly isolated, his administration demoralized by a dawning understanding that the war was unwinnable.

Two days later, *The Economist* published a column by the commander of Ukraine's armed forces, Valery Zaluzhny, outlining what it would take for Ukraine to break out of a prolonged war: advanced airpower, more sophisticated equipment, and a better system for drafting and training fighters. In an accompanying interview, Zaluzhny acknowledged that the expectations that he and the Ukrainian public—and, he implied, NATO—had had for the Ukrainian counter-offensive had been inflated. The subhead read, "General Valery Zaluzhny admits the war is at a stalemate."

Zelensky and Zaluzhny are the most popular men in Ukraine. Surveys show that more people trust the military, and Zaluzhny personally, than Zelensky. An open disagreement between them could destabilize the government and the country. So the administration closed ranks. When I met with Zagorodnyuk, the government adviser, in November, he told me that *The Economist* had misinterpreted Zaluzhny's statements. "A stalemate is when no one can move," he said. "We are always moving back and forth. What we have is equilibrium." Zelensky, when asked about Zaluzhny's grim assessment, had only halfheartedly contradicted his commander, saying that it wasn't a stalemate. And, in any case, Ukraine had no choice but to keep fighting: "If we give away a third of our country, nothing will end."

In September, Zelensky had travelled to Washington, where, earlier in the war, he had received a hero's welcome—House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had compared him to Winston Churchill, and Congress had approved nearly forty-five billion dollars in aid. This time, Zelensky was not invited to speak before Congress, where additional funding for Ukraine had stalled. In November, Zelensky's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, went to Washington, but he, too, returned empty-handed. Outside the administration, there was some annoyance. "What is he doing in Washington?" Oleh Rybachuk, a politician who once held Yermak's job, asked. "Why are we sending some clerk instead of the foreign minister?"

Meanwhile, even the aid that the United States and other Western countries had previously promised often arrived late or not at all. And some of the military equipment that had been delivered was proving to have a short shelf life. It was old, manufactured before Zelensky was born. When it did arrive in working condition, it would frequently prove unreliable. "It's like if you take a fifty-year-old car, in pristine condition, out of the garage and start using it on your long daily commute," Serhiy Leshchenko, an adviser to the administration, told me. "Something will crack."

Leshchenko had just returned from the front line in the Donbas, where he had delivered thirteen Mavic drones. Everyone in Kyiv seemed to talk about nothing but drones. The faith and hope that Ukrainians and their Western supporters once had in themselves, in their fighting spirit and their Army's tactical acumen, they now put in drones. An acquaintance who joined the military on the second day of the war had been flying drones; a journalist friend who had recently enlisted was enrolled in drone-operator school. At the Kyiv train station, as I was about to leave Ukraine, I ran into a group of Americans who said they were visiting the country on behalf of an American billionaire who wants to launch a drone production line in Ukraine.

A five-hundred-dollar drone can destroy a million-dollar tank or armored personnel carrier and increase human casualties by forcing troops to revert to doing things, such as demining, without the aid of valuable equipment. "It's a technological revolution," Zagorodnyuk told me. "It's, like, there used to be the circus, and then Cirque du Soleil came along and changed the nature of the circus forever." Ukraine had been flying drones from the early days of the war. Most of them were small, and had been crowdfunded in the West and brought in by volunteers a few at a time. The Russians were late to the technology, but they appear to have set up production at scale while the Ukrainians were preparing, interminably, for their counter-offensive. Now the Ukrainians were scrambling to catch up.

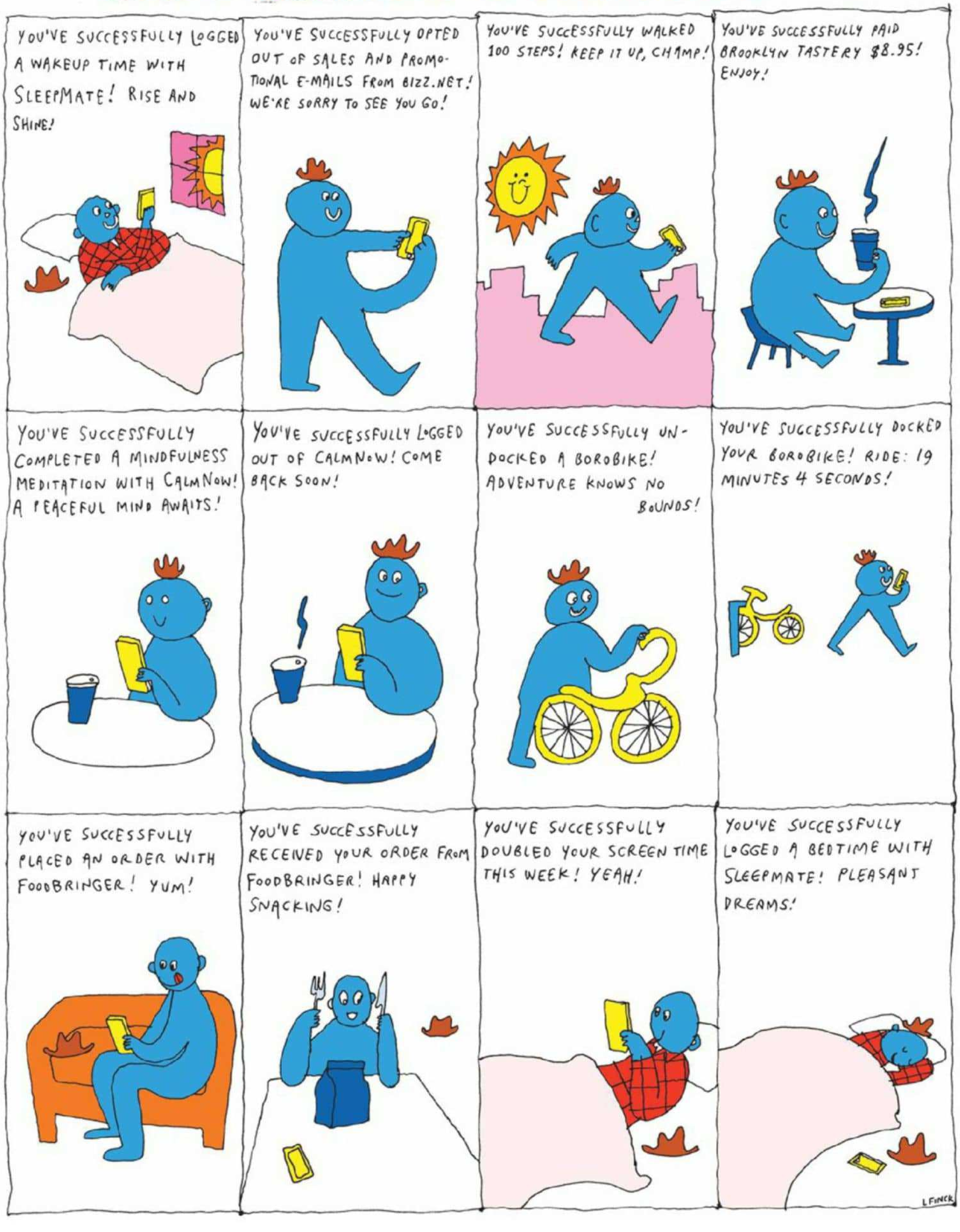
In early December, Ukraine stopped its former President Petro Poroshenko from leaving the country. Security forces suspected him of planning to meet with the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, a longtime ally of Russia, saying that such a meeting "could be exploited." Days earlier, Zelensky had said that Russia was trying to orchestrate a palace coup against him. Poroshenko, who had criticized Zelensky's handling of Ukraine's relationship with the West, claimed to be travelling abroad to help in the effort to secure aid from Europe, and denied planning to meet with Orbán. A couple of weeks later, Hungary blocked the E.U. from passing a fifty-billion-euro aid package to Ukraine. By then, Zelensky had flown back to Washington, in an eleventh-hour attempt to dislodge U.S. aid for Ukraine, but the mission failed.

In the final days of 2023, Russia unleashed a barrage of rocket and drone attacks on residential neighborhoods in cities across the country, killing dozens of civilians and causing wide-scale destruction in ways that were reminiscent of the early weeks of the war. People inside the Zelensky administration, after almost two years of publicly proclaiming the impossibility of negotiations, had begun saying that Russia was refusing to come to the table. Unlike Ukraine, whose main objective remains the liberation of occupied territories, Russia is now invested in war itself—military advances are secondary to the goal of keeping its war economy and propaganda machine churning. "This war is not going to end with negotiations," Zagorodnyuk told me. "Why would Putin want to negotiate?" With the Ukrainian counter-offensive failing and Western consensus cracking, time was on Putin's side.

In December, the *Times* reported that the Kremlin was putting out feelers for a possible ceasefire, but addressing only American and Western officials, without negotiating directly with Kyiv. A representative from Yermak's

SKETCHBOOK BY LIANA FINCK

CONGRATULATIONS!


YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY LOGGED A WAKEUP TIME WITH SLEEPMATE! RISE AND SHINE!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY OPTED OUT OF SALES AND PROMOTIONAL E-MAILS FROM BIZZ.NET! WE'RE SORRY TO SEE YOU GO!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY WALKED 100 STEPS! KEEP IT UP, CHAMP!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY PAID BROOKLYN TASTERY $8.95! ENJOY!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED A MINDFULNESS MEDITATION WITH CALMNOW! A PEACEFUL MIND AWAITS!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY LOGGED OUT OF CALMNOW! COME BACK SOON!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY UNDOCKED A BOROBIKE! ADVENTURE KNOWS NO BOUNDS!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY DOCKED YOUR BOROBIKE! RIDE: 19 MINUTES 4 SECONDS!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY PLACED AN ORDER WITH FOODBRINGER! YUM!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY RECEIVED YOUR ORDER FROM FOODBRINGER! HAPPY SNACKING!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY DOUBLED YOUR SCREEN TIME THIS WEEK! YEAH!
YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY LOGGED A BEDTIME WITH SLEEPMATE! PLEASANT DREAMS!
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office suggested that these overtures were "signals" designed for Western audiences. "They are either informational operations of Russian special services or unconfirmed rumors discredited by powerful missile strikes on Ukrainian cities," the representative said. "Claims about Russia's readiness for negotiations are an unfounded disregard for reality." Ukrainian officials now see any negotiated settlement as an opportunity for Russia to regroup and resume the fighting, again and again. "Russia is not fighting for land," Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Zelensky, told me. "It is fighting for its right to live in the past."

Five months before the Russian invasion, in September, 2021, I saw Zelensky speak at an annual political conference organized by the Ukrainian billionaire Victor Pinchuk. The event, held at Kyiv's national art museum, was a lavish, performatively progressive affair. Pinchuk brought in prominent Western journalists, including Fareed Zakaria, of CNN, and Rana Foroohar, of the *Financial Times*, to moderate panels. Attendees included the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, the former Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and the former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, who happens to be Pinchuk's father-in-law. There were elaborate lunches and dinners, all vegetarian; cookies came in individual packaging, which noted that they were prepared by adolescents with special needs.

Zelensky, who had then been in office for two and a half years, appeared onstage with Stephen Sackur, the combative host of the BBC's "HARDtalk." Zelensky's popularity rating was a fraction of what it had been at the start of his term. When Sackur asked him a question about the fight against corruption, Zelensky seemed to grow agitated. "I don't like the spirit in which you ask your questions," he said. Zelensky accused Sackur of perpetuating a "caricature view" of Ukraine that ignored its achievements, including recent judicial reforms and the creation of a high-tech industry that, he claimed, made Ukraine "the digital capital of Europe." As Zelensky walked to his car, a journalist asked him whether he planned to seek reëlection. At the time, it was apparent that, for Zelensky to make good on his commitment to address Ukraine's corruption problems, he would have to break his promise to be a one-term President. Zelensky told the journalist that he'd prefer to finish what he started and go on vacation.

After the Soviet Union broke apart, between 1989 and 1991, more than a dozen states tried to reconstitute themselves out of a unique kind of rubble: vast bureaucracies, command economies, and corrupt networks that made the systems function in spite of themselves. The Hungarian political scientists Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics have written that the resulting regimes fall into three categories: liberal democracies, such as the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; patronal autocracies, such as Russia and Belarus; and patronal democracies, such as Ukraine. A patronal democracy has a plurality of political actors—if an autocracy, in Magyar and Madlovics's definition, is a "single-pyramid system," then a democracy is "multi-pyramid"—but the competing political networks are each beholden to the money and power wielded by one person, generally a man, who has positioned himself as a successor to a part of the Soviet state's bureaucracy. Magyar and Madlovics have termed these networks "stubborn structures."

Part of the problem with patronal democracies is that the patrons are also the pillars of the political system. "I call Ukrainian reforms 'kick-ass reforms,'" Rybachuk, the longtime politician, told me. "You kick some ass, reforms move forward a little bit, you kick some more ass, they move forward some more." But today, when the West demands such reforms of Ukraine—a country that has borne unspeakable losses in its fight for democracy—it can feel painfully unfair. "It's difficult to build anti-corruption mechanisms in the middle of a war," Mustafa Nayyem told me. "Corruption levels decrease when there is less money. There is a lot of money in war." He pointed out that Western law-enforcement agencies still hadn't devised a method for seizing Russian assets abroad and diverting them to Ukraine as real-time reparations. "So," Nayyem said, "you are telling me that you don't have the resources to seize assets on your territory, in London or New York? And we are supposed to have the resources to arrest people engaging in corruption?"

Before the war, Zelensky signed an ambitious law that aimed to shield Ukraine's politics from the super-rich. The law created a registry of oligarchs who would be banned from financing the activities of political parties and from bidding for government assets at large-scale privatization auctions. Mikhail Minakov, a Ukrainian political philosopher, has written that the war helped accelerate what has been called de-oligarchization, both by strengthening the Presidency and by costing the oligarchs parts of their fortunes. Now that the oligarchs were weakened, Minakov wrote in early 2023, the question was what would replace the patronal-democracy system: a liberal-democratic framework or an autocracy. "With the centralization of power, full control over mass-media information flows, and the discipline of martial law, society may eagerly accept single-pyramid patronal rule in exchange for victory and fast economic recovery," he cautioned. He then reassured his readers that, with a Ukrainian victory apparently imminent, support for such a centralized system would quickly evaporate.

Zelensky, once an outsider, has something of his own patronal network. The office of the President is run by Andriy Yermak, a fifty-two-year-old former movie producer. People who have regular interactions with the administration talk about Yermak as though he had more power than the President. Yermak is said to have placed his associates in high-level, lucrative positions in state organizations and on oversight boards. One of Yermak's deputies, Oleh Tatarov, has been plagued by bribery accusations. But, when Ukraine's anti-corruption authorities opened an investigation, Yermak defended Tatarov publicly; the investigation was subsequently closed. More allegations have since come out, but Tatarov has kept his job. Yermak seemed unwilling to do anything that might distract from getting things done.

(Yermak's representative said that Yermak has never been involved in any investigation concerning Tatarov.)

This stance—that war is a time for action and the details can be sorted out later—has gained traction in the administration. "The risk of authoritarianism that Zelensky presents is different from what we used to have," Nataliya Gumenyuk, one of the country's leading journalists, told me. "It's not that he wants to get rich—it's his desire for efficiency." She paused, catching herself. "I'm not saying this is better."

Back in 2021, the conference at the museum ended with a farewell dinner in the main dining room. But about three dozen guests, including me and several other journalists, were invited to join Pinchuk in a separate room. A menu at each place setting promised steak and a selection of wines from the billionaire's collection. "I am sick of this vegan shit," Pinchuk announced, during a toast. (Pinchuk's office contested my recollection of this.) He added that the wines would be introduced by Zakaria, the CNN host. Though the attendees weren't sworn to secrecy, Pinchuk clearly assumed that no one would write about his casual disparagement of his own gathering's proclaimed values. This is how patronal networks function: there are formal rules, and then there are the rules for the wealthy and the well connected, who assume, based on decades of experience, that people will do them favors and keep their secrets.

Ukrainians do arrest officials suspected of corruption, even as every arrest amplifies the sense that corruption is pervasive and intractable. In September, after journalists had uncovered evidence that the defense ministry was buying food and clothing, some of which was unsuitable for the fight, at inflated prices, Zelensky was forced to dismiss his defense minister, Oleksii Reznikov. (Reznikov has called some of the irregularities "technical mistakes," and the government launched a series of investigations.) Ukraine has also found ways to seize business profits and use them to build new water mains in areas that once relied on the Kakhovka Dam, in the country's south, which Russian forces blew up last June. The construction, carried out by Nayyem's agency, was finished in a matter of months; in peacetime, he said, it would have taken years. His agency was able to simplify many parts of the process, including an environmental review. "Yes, many things can't be transparent in wartime, and many people abuse this," Nayyem said. "We'll figure it out, but we are losing time."

In November, I crossed over the restored bridge to the western suburbs of Kyiv. When I last visited Bucha, in June, 2022, trains carrying modular houses donated by Poland had just arrived. The houses looked neat and modern, like white shipping containers with water and electrical connections, but Bucha residents were suspicious of them. Ukrainians keep their houses in families for generations. They think that a real house has a foundation and is built of brick. Nayyem calls this "the Naf Naf mentality," for the most practical of the Three Little Pigs. When his agency has offered to replace destroyed homes with houses made of lighter, contemporary materials, many former homeowners have felt they were being offered a bum deal. There is also a general lack of documentation—a house may be registered in the name of a relative who is now abroad, or landownership may not be documented at all—which, in many cases, has made it difficult to begin construction.

In Bucha, those who survived the occupation could afford to be picky. Countless foreign dignitaries had come to visit the ruins and the sites of Russian war crimes. Howard Buffett, the son of the billionaire Warren Buffett, had visited several times and committed five hundred million dollars to helping Ukraine rebuild. In November, I drove down Vokzalna Street, through what is now called Buffett Square, with Kateryna Ukraintseva, a lawyer and an activist who is a member of the Bucha city council. In the spring of 2022, this street was strewn with burned Russian tanks and the dead bodies of local residents, some of whom had been dragged out of their houses and executed. Back then, there seemed to be no intact structures on Vokzalna. Now the street is lined with pastel-colored stucco homes, behind shiny metal fences that match the roofs. But, Ukraintseva said, "some people don't have money to buy furniture."

Many residents of Bucha, which used to be a middle-class suburb, are

"When two people love each other very much, they start sending each other funny TikTok videos."

struggling. This is partly because the more affluent residents have left the country, but Ukraintseva also sees unemployment all around her. She had recently advertised for an assistant at her law practice, which reopened in the summer of 2022, assuming she would hire someone young, with limited qualifications. She received a number of résumés from attorneys in good standing who could not find other work. Ukraintseva's practice is oriented toward businesses, particularly condo associations. In addition, she has been helping women navigate the legal system to find the bodies of their loved ones and to get them properly interred. One case involves three misidentified bodies, each transferred to the wrong village or town under the wrong name.

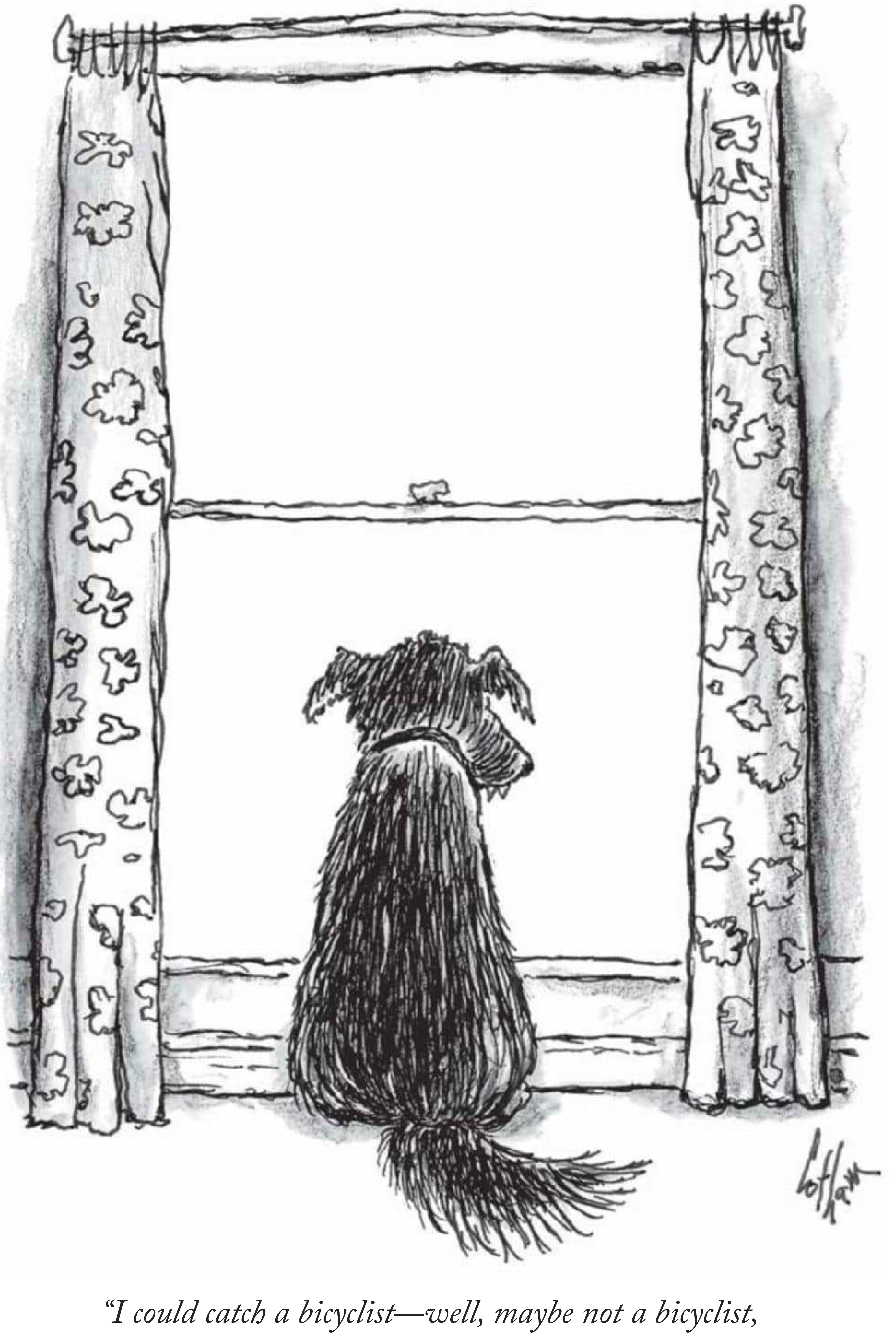
As a city councillor, Ukraintseva is in the opposition to the mayor, Anatolii Fedoruk. Like many people I met in Bucha, she holds him at least partially responsible for the town's lack of preparedness at the start of the war. Territorial defense hadn't been mounted, evacuation plans hadn't been drawn up, and Fedoruk was, to the last, reassuring people that there would be no invasion. (Fedoruk has said that defense and evacuation efforts should have been organized by higher authorities and that he did everything he could.) Fedoruk has been mayor of Bucha for twenty-five years—"Like Putin!" Ukraintseva exclaimed. But he can't be ousted now; municipal elections, too, are suspended under martial law.

The container houses from Poland hadn't moved far from the railroad station where I had last seen them. They now stood in a parking lot between a small outdoor market and a large apartment block. From a distance, they looked like rows of single-car garages. Most of the inhabitants were not Bucha residents whose houses had been destroyed but Ukrainians displaced from the east of the country. Permanent residents of Bucha passed these containers on their way to and from the market; the windows were at eye level. Every room contained two bunk beds—perhaps the designers had had in mind single people or families with children, but many of the rooms brought together two couples. A significant number of Ukraine's internally displaced people are now living with a physical or a mental disability. Strangers sharing rooms are pulled into one another's care willy-nilly.

The war has created a new socioeconomic hierarchy. Even before the invasion, millions of Ukrainians were dependent on remittances—money sent back by family members working abroad—but, in 2022, total remittances decreased by some five per cent, and the amount seems to have fallen further in 2023. The shortfall is largely made up for by international aid. "You know who the biggest enemy of democracy is?" Solontay, the political organizer, asked me. "Poverty. You can have a rich country without democracy, but you can't have a poor country with democracy. All the organizations that distribute humanitarian aid are working to save our democracy. They fix the pipes and install generators. So we don't have millions of people who have nothing to lose."

Still, internally displaced people form a new underclass. Most have no jobs. Their housing is often suitable only in an emergency—which is what this war was, before it started looking like it would never end.

Ukraintseva's own high-rise apartment building had been hit by a mortar shell and raided by Russian soldiers. It has since been repaired. These days, Ukraintseva runs a volunteer operation



"I could catch a bicyclist—well, maybe not a bicyclist, but I could catch a jogger, definitely."

out of a small office on the ground floor. She is raising funds to buy equipment for the military, which helpers in the West purchase and send as unaccompanied luggage on passenger buses. On the day I visited her, we drove to the bus station in Kyiv to meet a shipment of Starlink terminals that had arrived from Germany. Ukraintseva showed me photos of soldiers whom her group has helped. Not all of them were still alive. Each photo came with a story. One group of guys had asked for a Wi-Fi booster that they could hang on a tree, allowing them to use their cell phones to get online. She pulled it out of a desk drawer and showed it to me.

"But that's not secure," I blurted.

"None of it is secure," she said.

I met Denys Kobzin, the sociologist, at a brewery and steak house on the outskirts of Kyiv. It was crowded with men who looked like they could be office workers, but, like Kobzin, many of them were active-duty soldiers living nearby, grabbing a beer between the end of the workday and curfew. The last time I'd seen Kobzin was a couple of weeks before the invasion, at his office in Kharkiv. Now he told me that, even though his first degree was in psychology, he had had no appreciation of P.T.S.D. until he faced the trauma of war. "Your prefrontal cortex gets overrun," he said. "The amygdala gets stronger. You are always sensing a threat everywhere. It's exhausting. You can't focus. Add to that the death of a battle buddy, a conflict in the family, and you can't cope." He has offered counselling sessions to veterans and servicepeople. "I was able to talk down a couple of people who were about to take their own lives," he said.

Those who have stayed in the country often have little patience for Ukrainians abroad. "I am very angry at women who go and leave their husbands here," Ukraintseva had said. "You are either a family or not a family. You should be going through things together." Divorce rates have risen sharply, and it is conventional wisdom that many women who left for Western Europe have made new lives for themselves. "Every guy I know who sent his wife and kids abroad has now been divorced," Kobzin told me. "The gap between those who've been fighting the war and those who haven't is growing." Leshchenko, the Zelensky adviser, agreed. "It's time for people who see themselves as Ukrainians to come back," he said. "Schools in Kyiv are open—they all have bomb shelters. My friends who keep coming up with excuses stop being friends."

The only person I interviewed who disagreed with this sentiment was Nayyem's brother, Masi, a lawyer who became a soldier. He had lost his right eye when the vehicle he was riding in was blown up. "It's been psychologically challenging, because they removed this part of my brain," he told me, rubbing his forehead, above his missing eye. "It's hard for me to control my emotions. I get very anxious. I've had fits of paranoia." Masi still runs a law firm, which employs some thirty attorneys. Recently, when a dishonest client exposed the firm to a wave of public criticism, Masi cried for three hours, an outburst he attributed to his trauma. "I am grateful to the people who left Ukraine and took their kids," he said. "As I am grateful to my father, who brought me here at the age of five so that I didn't see as much war as I could have."

While the war creates new social and economic divisions, the Army itself erases them. "I've spent much of the war among people I couldn't have imagined being in a room together in peacetime," Kobzin told me. "An Azeri man, an Armenian, a Jew, an antisemite, a small-time criminal, and a major entrepreneur—all of them managed to avoid conflict, at first because we all had a common higher goal and then because we'd formed connections and were now invested in accepting one another as we are. A guy might be going on about some antisemitic conspiracy theories. But he is a member of the family. Tomorrow you go into battle and you have no one but each other." Out of the hundred-person company Kobzin started out with in February, 2022, he figured that some thirty-five have been severely wounded and more than a dozen have been killed. The rest remain on active duty.

When I was in Ukraine, the parliament, which resumed at near full capacity a year into the war, was considering bills that would legalize same-sex partnerships and the use of medical marijuana. The first measure would help the country comply with European Union requirements for entry and, parliament sponsors have argued, is only fair to L.G.B.T.Q. people who are serving in the military. The other measure was advertised as helpful for veterans suffering from P.T.S.D. (The parliament voted to legalize medical marijuana in December; the fate of the same-sex-partnership bill remains uncertain.) "These are all signs of society moving in the direction of European practices," Leshchenko told me.

In mid-December, the European Union began formal negotiations with Ukraine on its accession. Ukraine will have to live up to legal and social standards of democracy—including functioning political institutions, protections from discrimination, and lack of corruption—that even some standing members, such as Hungary, don't meet. A National Democratic Institute report on Ukraine's compliance with the European Union requirements identified the lack of media pluralism as a key issue. But the institute's survey also found increased support for L.G.B.T.Q. rights: seventy-two per cent, compared with twenty-eight per cent in 2019. Unlike many other societies at war, Ukraine seems to have become more, rather than less, tolerant during the past two years. "Europe itself is the ideology," Solontay, the political organizer, said. "It's a beacon, and we are swimming toward it."

Solontay also told me that, in his efforts to help elected administrations retain power despite martial law, he has found that "there is more and more war and less and less democracy. Where democracy still exists, it's an accident."

All of the people I spoke with this fall and winter in Ukraine—politicians, government officials, civil activists, journalists, a book publisher, a movie producer, and several soldiers—said that they no longer thought about the end of the war. They could not imagine it. This was by far the most worrisome sign, not only for the fight but also for the thing they'd fought so hard for. Democracy is, after all, the belief that the world can be better. Ukrainians are not surrendering. But, as Kobzin told me, "I've given up my freedom so I can fight for my freedom. And this is true of most everyone I know." ♦

Life with Spider

Patrick Langley

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY HANA MENDEL

This is a story about Fletcher Hardy. In case you haven't guessed, that is not his real name. He's fine with me telling his story—more than fine: he encouraged me to—on two conditions. The first is that no one be able to trace it to him. He has theories, persuasive ones, about what can attach to a name online. As for the second condition, I'll get to that later.

My friend is still ashamed of what happened, basically. Not that anyone thinks he should be—me least of all, no matter what happened between us. The source of his unease, the trouble with the thing he called Spider, began in the summer of 2009. But, before we get to that, some context.

Fletcher and I had been friends a few years by that point. We'd met in a crowded smoking area when we were both nineteen and high. That I liked him instantly had something to do with the drugs, but we only came to love each other after the comedown. We prided ourselves on our taste in bands (Coil, Fugazi) and movies (Ozu, Kurosawa), and in time our connoisseurship made us devotees of each other as well. Since we were studying at different universities, Fletcher at Nottingham and me at Leeds, much of our early friendship took place on Gchat and MySpace. After he got what he referred to as a "high 2:1" (or "not a first," as I called it) in civil engineering, he landed a job at a multinational construction company, the name of which I forget but whose head office was in Hatton Garden, London, where I also moved after finals. For my efforts in geography, I was awarded a 2:2, which my mother called a Desmond, as in Tutu.

Fletcher and I had graduated into the recession, which, since I did not understand what "the economy" referred to, exactly, much less how economics worked, felt like living at the whim of a brutal mirage. I pictured holographic skyscrapers crashing in silent processions around our ears; I attended the funeral of a school friend's father, who had driven at high speed into a wall after his catering business, which had been running for more than two decades, went into liquidation. I delivered flowers in the morning, waited tables at night. In between, I wrote freelance articles, gig reviews and so on. These odd jobs paid peanuts, a large portion of which went to paying off the mortgage on an asset that I lived in but did not own; the interest on that mortgage went to the bank, which my taxes were helping to bail out. Partly because of my job-juggling, by July, 2009, Fletcher and I, who texted or e-mailed several times a week, hadn't seen each other in something like three months. I did not know it at the time—he kept it secret at the start—but the trouble with Spider had been going on for a while.

Fletcher and I arranged to meet on a week night. The pub was packed, warm and uncomfortably humid, every table full, condensation streaming down the windows. Fletcher was running late, which upset me: it seemed disrespectful. At the root of my sulking was fear. I worried that our friendship was over; that, having found a solid, well-paid position—the kind we used to call, semi-derisively, a "real job"—Fletcher had grown up, moved on. But, when he arrived, my annoyance became concern. He was thin, he looked exhausted. As he perched on his stool and lifted his pint glass, I noticed that his knee was bouncing up and down at high speed. I told him to stop it—I had a weakness for telling him off. After our second pint, I asked if things were really as "good" as he claimed they were.

"Yeah, yeah," he said vaguely, forcing a smile. "Just tired. This new job . . ."

He explained that his nine-to-five was in reality a nine-to-eight, sometimes -nine, in an open-plan office with its instant coffee and potted palms, and that he was working on a major upgrade to London's sewer network. Originally built by Joseph Bazalgette, hero of industry, the chief engineer of the Metropolitan Board of Works, the sewers were in urgent need of greater capacity—bigger tunnels, essentially. There were obvious jokes to be made, and I made them. Fletcher laughed. That was all I needed. I soon forgot, or chose to ignore, how out of sorts he seemed. The only thing that bothered me, when I remembered the meeting later, was his gaze, how restless and motile it had been, how it darted and flickered. Throughout the evening, he kept glancing into the corners of the room, under tables, under chairs, into the shadows beneath the bar, in the murky reflections behind the upside-down bottles, as though he was looking for something. I made a note to keep an eye on him.

Fletcher's parents had separated, semi-amicably, when he was nine or ten. His father, Larry, now lived on the Isle of Man. About once a month, he would send Fletcher a screenshot of TT racing motorbikes, high-performance Japanese models from the nineties, almost always without context or comment. His mother, Jody, who had remarried and moved to Dorset, sent Fletcher links to droll cartoons posted on Facebook and to the Web sites of restaurants she was planning to visit, as well as rambling, upbeat messages intended for other people. His younger brother was training to be a tree surgeon. His elder sister, a mother of one, was going through a messy divorce, having found out that her husband had lied to her about pretty much everything: he didn't have a degree from Cambridge, or anywhere else for that matter; he'd never been to Nairobi, let alone been stationed there by the Foreign Office; he was born in Hull, not Holland. I don't mention any of this because it explains the appearance of Spider in Fletcher's life. That was *his* hypothesis. Or it *was* his hypothesis—he later got over it. For a while, he was convinced that something in his past, which he had done or had been done to him, had cursed him. Finding no reason, no wound, he extended his retrospect beyond the horizon of birth: he must have done something unforgivable in a previous life. This was magical thinking. Given where his head was at, though, it could have been worse.

A week or two after the pub, Fletcher and I went for a walk. The weather was unseasonably cool, so we set off in our coats. A fine gray rain was falling on Kew Gardens. We had the place almost to ourselves. The weather that had put the tourists off brought out the vividness of the leaves and flowers, and the tarmac paths glistened through the trees. We drifted around, taking in the wise old plants with their Latinate names, ducking into the steamy greenhouses, talking about films, music, love prospects, heartache, all the traditional subjects. Something was on Fletcher's mind. It was the same thing, I guessed, that had been disturbing him at the pub. Eventually, he turned away, looking down an avenue of trees.

"I have to talk to you about something."

I tensed for a revelation. Cancer, perhaps. Or addiction, a death, a secret marriage, a new job, a religious conversion, the friendship breakdown I had feared. He stalled and dithered, frowning in anguish. "I don't know how to start. . . . You're going to think I've lost it. . . ."

I am not the most patient person, and I grew instantly frustrated at his painful failure to speak. It was making me anxious—an unintentional power play, on his part. "*What*?"

"It's hard to talk about."

"You're not talking, that's the point."

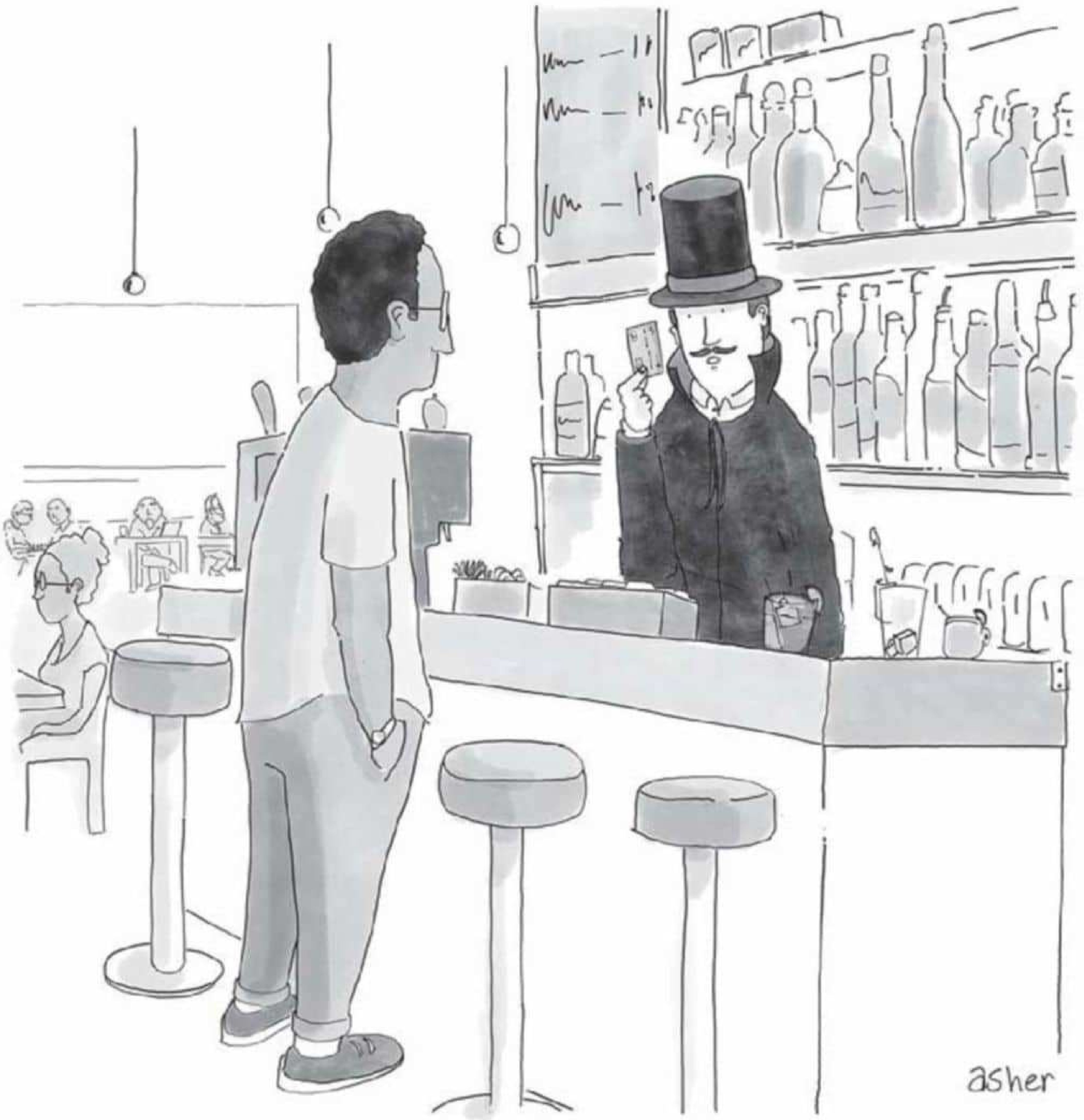
"It's a thing. Or *something*. Something has been visiting me. A creature. I don't know what it is."

The soft, endless rain sizzled round us as we walked.

A couple of months before, Fletcher told me, he had started noticing strange movements, dark fleeting shapes in the corners of his vision. He didn't think much of them at first. But the shapes persisted. They moved swift and silent, like the shadows of birds, or surreal fish swimming through the air. They could appear in any place at any moment, in his bedroom, at a party, at work. Once, while airborne, he had seen one dancing on a wing of the plane. Or he thought he had. The shapes moved the moment he looked at them directly. He had an eye test and ordered glasses to correct an astigmatism, though it affected only his left eye; in any event, the glasses made no difference. In fact, the shapes grew more apparent. Whenever he noticed one, he felt the mild but unmistakable pulse of a complex emotion that he'd never felt at any other time, the closest word for which was dread.

The trouble had *really* begun around six weeks ago, Fletcher said, on a hot night after work, when he had returned home late and seen "something"—he used that vague word again.

He wouldn't be more specific, only noted that, prior to this encounter, he had begun to suspect that these shapes were not separate at all, neither flock nor shoal, but, rather, aspects of the same presence, one so fleet-footed that he had caught only glimpses. Realizing this, he was reminded of how, even when he was a boy, and certainly in his early teens, he had noticed these shapes, these shadow flickers at the edges of things, and of how they had made him feel at once distant from other people and in touch with the deep roots of something shared, a collective force underpinning the social world. The difference now was one of frequency: he had never seen so many of these fluid shapes before. And this presence (if indeed it was singular) knew Fletcher in some intimate way, had peered deep into his being and understood that he was wrong, base, abject, rejected, unwell. I had never heard Fletcher speak in this vulnerable, self-pitying way before. He was doing so by way of preamble, he said, in the hope that I would understand something—namely that, when he had arrived home that night, hung his coat in the hall, greeted his flatmate, washed his face, brushed his teeth, pushed open his bedroom door, and seen Spider standing there, he had not screamed or run away, the reason being that he *recognized* what he was looking at.



"Is this your card?"

I kicked a pebble hard ahead of us. "And what was it?"

Spider, Fletcher said, resembled its namesake in some basic respects. It had a large central body and long, flexible legs—six, not eight. Its skin was jet black, its high shine like that of plastic or crude oil. There were no eyes, ears, or mouth, and yet it seemed keenly aware of its surroundings. Its legs were long and uncommonly flexible: it seemed to have no bones except, perhaps, its skull, which was also its body—the nomenclature was as confusing to him as the form. In any case, it didn't seem a creature native to air so much as to water: the way it moved brought aquatic predators to mind. On the night Fletcher first saw Spider at its full extent, without it darting off the moment he tried to look at it directly, it stood about as tall as he was, and its body was roughly the size of a basketball, but flatter at the top.

"A bit like that," he told me, pointing at the pebble I had kicked, which we had now caught up with. He was afraid that I would think him insane. At that particular moment, I did. But I also recognized that, if Fletcher believed that this creature, this "something," had visited him, then in a sense it really had.

"Were you scared?"

"Of course. But I knew it wouldn't hurt me."

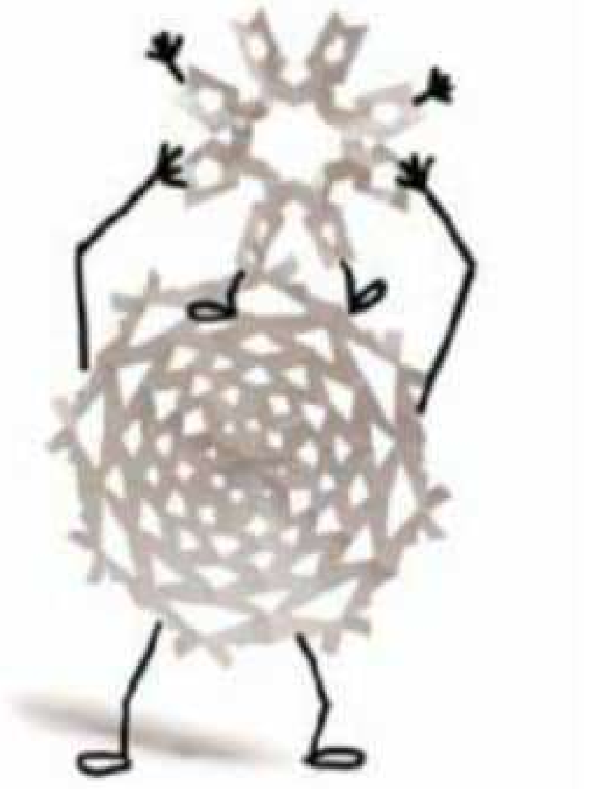
I asked him how he'd known. He shrugged and mumbled something about a sense, a presence—familiarity, again.

We arrived at a formal garden, its colored-crayon flower beds doubly vivid in the rain. I asked Fletcher how he'd reacted. He'd been faced with a dilemma, he said. To get rid of Spider through force would require, first, overcoming his fear of touching its smooth, hard-looking flesh and, second, making noise that would attract his flatmate's attention, which for whatever reason (shame, perhaps) he could not abide. To do nothing was equally unacceptable, though, since he wanted to get some sleep, and the mere thought of closing his eyes with that "something" watching over him, raised up on its long, skinny legs, caused his stomach to tighten, his pulse to quicken. He stood and stared at Spider. It "stared" back. Then, with a flutter of its flexible legs—which, when they moved at high speed, lost their individual definition and resembled black smoke or inky water—Spider disappeared through the window with a whipping sound.

"It was introducing itself," Fletcher said. "Letting me know it was there."

We looped back around to the wide, square pond and headed toward the Palm House, and as we walked Fletcher told me that, in the course of the next ten days or so, Spider made further appearances. Some were comic, others sinister; most were both. Spider perched gargoyle-like on city rooftops after dark, appeared from under Fletcher's bed in the manner of an octopus emerging from a reef, clung to the ceiling when he went for a shower, hid in the splayed leaves of a plant in the office, rifled through pages in his desk, the belongings and clothes in his room, its leg tips clacking in a crazy tap dance as it skipped from spot to spot. That Fletcher was unable to ignore Spider seemed to be the intended effect. It had come to remind him—but of what? Itself, Fletcher thought, as if to say: *I'm with you, always have been, always will be.* Hence the dread.

It was impossible for Fletcher to socialize, with Spider in the picture. Friends and acquaintances would, he felt certain, know that Spider was with him, was *his*. His colleagues had begun to notice at work—a few late starts, minor mistakes, and so on—but he couldn't exactly quit. The recession was on, he had rent to pay.



In more desperation than mirth, I cracked another joke about his commitment to building big sewers. Fletcher laughed again, weakly this time. We agreed it was time to head home.

All the while he'd been speaking, I had stolen glances at the bushes, the paths, the ornamental bridges and sculptures, looking for a sign of the creature. I had seen none. I told Fletcher so. Foolishly, I thought this might bring him some relief. Instead, he told me I was wrong. Spider had been with us this whole time.

As we made our way out, he pointed above our heads. I peered into the shaggy canopy of a large, handsome tree by the side of the path. Its thick trunk and branches, the dark-brown bark of which was deeply furrowed, were abundant with pale-green, star-shaped leaves that danced and shivered, shedding rain as they stirred in the breeze. I saw two squirrels and a magpie, that was all. Then something in the canopy caught my eye, concealed and revealed behind a shimmer of leaves. I had spotted a dark, dense shape midway up a branch, a clot of shadow or an oversized olive. Despite its featureless sheen, there was something *watchful* about it, intelligent certainly. But the moment I saw Spider, if it even was Spider, it moved, rolled, dropped, and plummeted to earth, vanishing behind a bush—I could not tell where it had landed. This whole sequence was over so quickly, in fact, that I began to wonder whether I'd seen it at all.

A fortnight passed before Fletcher invited me round to his place: his flatmate was out, which meant we could talk freely. We ordered pizza, which we ate in the living room. Fletcher had a "new approach" to dealing with Spider, he said. It sounded violent, but I took his broader point: attempting to ignore the thing had only made it stronger. But there was a problem. Whatever kind of creature Spider was, if "creature" was the accurate term, it was uncommonly resilient, to the apparent point of indestructibility. Just the night before, Fletcher had pinned Spider down and attacked it with a hammer, raining blows on its shiny head. These did no damage whatsoever, except to Fletcher's wall: the hammer had bounced off Spider, spun through the air, and lodged itself in the plaster.

He had tried and failed to drown Spider in the bath. And thrown it into the fire, watching the flames lick at, but not burn, its glossy black sides. And wrestled it into the microwave, where it had rotated like a luxury blob on the machine's lazy Susan, for a duration and at a temperature that would have turned almost anything else into a sputtering puddle. Fletcher had locked it in rooms, cages, cupboards, and in response Spider would change its shape, flatten itself to an envelope, post itself through the shallowest apertures. Its sadistic harassment of Fletcher had a gleeful edge, like the jangly antics of a cartoon nemesis, Jerry to his Tom. Yet the damage it caused was substantial.

"Look," Fletcher said, rolling up his shirtsleeve to show me the bruises, and shallow cuts that looked like they'd scar.

When Spider clambered on Fletcher's shoulders at the dinner table or on the toilet, say, its sharp legs bit into the flesh of his neck, leaving love bites and nicks. As he walked, it would appear out of nowhere and head-butt him like an irate goat. It even did its thing around Suki, the teacher Fletcher had been seeing and was falling for. It hovered and loomed, waited and "watched" on their dates, passing in front of the desk lamp to cast spindly shadows, the gothic extent of which reminded him of that famous scene in "Nosferatu" when the vampire's shadow is flung across the wall, long fingers tapered like claws. Suki hadn't noticed these shapes or, if she had, politely ignored them. But it was only a matter of time.

Sometimes Fletcher woke to find Spider resting on his sternum, in the manner of a night terror or “a meditating crab,” its black legs neatly folded under its body that was also its skull. On such mornings, Spider, boulder-heavy, pinned him down. Often, after Fletcher had struggled to rise, Spider would not let go. It would wrap its flexible legs around his chest and cling there, even in the shower, and forceful attempts to remove it only caused Fletcher to injure himself. With Spider, now flattened, pressed tight to his ribs like a stab-proof vest, he had no choice but to put a shirt on and go to work, inspecting technical drawings, typing up safety reports, visiting concrete plants and tunnel digs, hoping that Spider didn’t slip out.

“It’s been stressful,” he told me.

We’d been talking for hours. The pizza was cold, the beer was warm, Fletcher was hyper and downbeat at once. And he had an important question.

“I need you to help me get rid of this thing. Would you do that for me? I can’t think of anyone else. I spoke to my dad about it. He said he once knew a guy who had a similar problem but couldn’t remember anything else about him. That helped a bit. Then he sent me a video of a guy repairing his Yamaha YZF-R1. I don’t know what to make of that.”

I didn’t hear from Fletcher for the next few days, which was a relief. Of course I hadn’t hesitated to tell him yes, I would help him. Of course I would. That’s what friends are for, to support each other, stick together, blah blah.

I’m not trying to be cynical here. I do, in fact, believe all that stuff about goodness and loyalty, as I hope certain aspects of this story will show. But I need to be clear about my limitations, at least as they were at that time. No one is perfect—I certainly wasn’t. And, when the desire arose to help Fletcher, the image came to mind of that “something” I had seen in the trees, and a cold, drenched feeling washed through my lungs, at which point I wished—I actively hoped—that Fletcher would get rid of Spider on his own. In fact, I was angry that he hadn’t.

During intensive bursts of messaging, to which we had graduated after Gchat, Fletcher suggested that Spider might be looking for love—in the universal sense of a child, a pet, anything with a pulse. One way to think about the creature, he wrote, was to “pity and comfort it.” Its inability to leave him alone suggested that it didn’t know how to be by itself; to embrace the thing, to “kill it with kindness,” might be the only way to get rid of it.

The next day, however, after another sleepless night, Fletcher had changed tack completely. Now he wanted to destroy the thing, once and for all. “Everything has a breaking point,” he wrote, “everything.” I imagined an eyelid twitching as he typed. As if that weren’t ominous enough, he told me he had “had an idea.” He would be in touch again in the next few days. “Soon this will be over.”

A week or so later, he wrote to ask for my help on a particular date. I wriggled out of it, claiming a conflict. Fletcher suggested another date. This happened twice. The third time, I found myself going along, unable to admit to my discomfort (my cowardice), hoping instead that something would intervene on my behalf. For a moment, it looked as if something really might.

I arrived at Fletcher’s flat on the pretext of dinner. From his bedroom came very faint banging sounds. As Fletcher and I cooked and ate a stir-fry, it became apparent that his flatmate and his flatmate’s girlfriend, with whom he had planned to spend the night, were fighting silently, furiously, over text. If it carried on much longer, Fletcher would have to call off his “idea.” But around eleven—a good three hours later than expected—the flatmate, huffing and puffing with outrage but also visibly relieved, wheeled his bike out the front door. At which point Fletcher vanished, too. He emerged a moment later and set a heavy object down on the kitchen table with a clunk.

“What’s that for?” I knew exactly what he was planning to do with it, though, had known the moment I’d seen its toothed disk.

“We’ll get rid of its legs first,” Fletcher said, speaking less to me, it seemed,

GIST

1

I grew up in the particleboard suburbs,
one house like the next, an egg
in a Styrofoam carton

so I like to get right down to it,

to the smallest
unit of noise-cancelling

hum
and be done with it,

but not yet.

2

I am first
an area of focus,

a point
of attachment,

but I am also
a way of arranging
material—

one that can't
be replicated.

I have extensive knowledge
of people who don't exist:

my mother, who, for decades,
dyed her hair
an impossible shade of red

and who had, facing the door,
a popular painting
of wild horses.

3

Can I have the burgundy
leaves of this old
November pear tree
coolly twinkling
forever instead?

—*Rae Armantrout*

than to himself, as though by reciting his plan in advance he could summon it into being. "Then we'll get it into pieces and put each piece in concrete, in a separate bucket, and we'll leave it to set a bit, not properly, we won't have time to set it fully, just enough to get the process going, and then we'll get the bits into the car, and then . . ." He went on like that for a minute or two. Clearly, he had planned this in detail, never mind that every attempt thus far had failed to leave so much as a scratch. I asked if Fletcher had got the idea by reading up on gangsters or serial killers. He laughed a little, but in his eyes was a haunted, hunted look.

"I just need you to hold it down," he said, "while I go in with this."

He picked up the angle grinder again, and the disk's sharp teeth caught the halogens' glare.

The bumping noise was coming from an expensive-looking flight case that Fletcher had wrestled Spider into, and which, judging from the bumps appearing in the plastic carapace, it was steadily working its way out of, like a luggage monster attempting to hatch. Fletcher and I stood in what he generously called our "protective gear," much of it from the D.I.Y. section: plastic goggles, dust masks, yellow helmets, cricket gloves, and shin guards. The shin guards bothered me more than anything. Hadn't the creature submitted calmly to other attempts to damage it, squatting quietly in the flooded bath, the microwave?

And so it proved when Fletcher slowly opened the case. The thrashing had stopped. There it sat, legs folded neatly under it. The same feeling I'd had on glimpsing it—if that even was it—in Kew Gardens, a cellular intuition that something had gone very, very wrong with the world, came over me again, and I wanted to be as far away from it as possible.

"Ready?"

I nodded. We hadn't rehearsed—how could we have?—but I knew what to do. Fletcher had advised me to be gentle, and I was. Squatting on my haunches, I reached for Spider as I might have for a kitten. Its upper surface, smooth and unblemished, was shiny. My reflection was distorted in it. I was looming now, not it; my outstretched hands resembled claws.

Spider did not flinch or squirm when I lifted it. Nor when I turned it upside down and placed it on the sofa cushion. Not even when I pressed it down, so that, slowly, gently, Fletcher could place a ratchet strap over it, loose on its folded legs. The strap clicked as we tightened it, at which point Spider went berserk.

The directionless fury of its legs was unlike anything I had encountered before. How to explain it? A cauldron of blur, a storm of liquid sabres, a bouquet of black whips: none are right. Spider's legs slashed at my cheeks and neck, cutting my lip and knocking my goggles loose. Only by pressing down with my hands and knees, with all my weight, was I able to hold Spider in place. A deafening noise filled the room. It took a moment to connect it with Fletcher, who had the angle grinder—its blade whirring—in both hands. There was a risk that he would buzz one of my fingers off, so I flinched. But through a series of nods and gestures we communicated a plan: at a signalled moment, I would move my hand to one side, allowing Fletcher's blade to strike.

And that had to be soon. Much longer and Spider would shape-shift and scuttle away. I gave the nod.

I couldn't tell you why the angle grinder succeeded where hammers, water, microwaves, flames, and all manner of techniques had failed—sometimes I wonder if my being there was part of the reason—but, the moment the blade hit the joint between one of Spider's legs and its body, black liquid erupted like a blowout at an oil well. It was the same absolute shade as Spider's body, and there seemed to be too much of it, more than the creature's size could contain. It had the cold, silty smell of wet mud, but clean, almost steely, with none of the low-tide funk. It spattered my goggles, which were already askew, making it doubly hard to see, but through the shadow and smear I glimpsed something on the floor. It squirmed like a landed eel.

There was a banging at the door. I don't remember much of the encounter that followed, but, in the midst of that awful night, it was perhaps the most surreal sequence of it all.

I walked to the front door the way a sleepwalker might. Opening it, I saw a woman in late middle age. Fletcher's downstairs neighbor had come about the racket. I explained that there was a "plumbing emergency" and gestured wearily at my clothing, at the air—the hellish grinding, thumping noises coming through the bedroom door behind me, under which black liquid was seeping. Something in what I said, or her own version of the lung-drenching feeling, perhaps, persuaded her to leave: she nodded, backed away. By the time I returned to Fletcher's room, Spider was in two halves.

The amnesiac haze that descended on the rest of that night, and to some extent my next decision, can be explained with reference to the state I was in. Spider was soaking through my clothes, into my pores. I had never known a feeling quite like it; it was despair of a kind, a transcendent negation of possibilities, every part of me subsumed into the dark god of an awful feeling, an iron grip that would never let go. I went around the room, bent at the knees, trying and failing to pick up one of Spider's spasming legs. Fletcher was wrestling one of Spider's halves into a net, his goggles were off, there were tears in his eyes.

A realization hit me. It felt like spotting a high window I hadn't noticed before. There was a simplicity to it, and a kind of reverse vertigo, such as a pilot might feel hitting the ejector button. I could help Fletcher finish the job and live with that feeling a moment longer, perhaps forever. Or I could save myself.

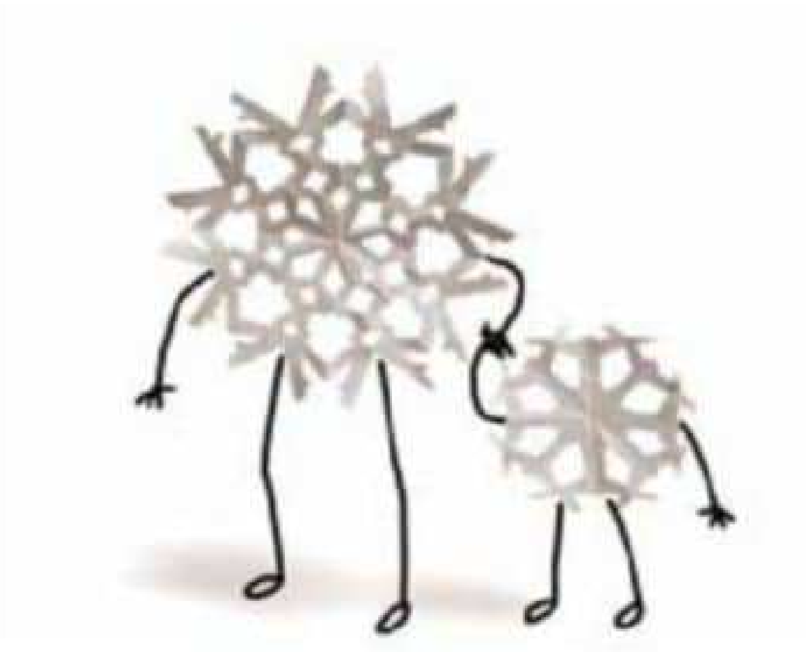
Without saying goodbye, or anything else, for that matter, I backed out of the bedroom and made for the door.

It wasn't long before I met someone. She worked in tech and liked to climb. There was a wall in the railway arches in London Bridge that we visited nights and weekends, where I learned to boulder. For all that it demanded of the body, plotting routes was a dry, formal activity akin to playing chess, and I found it relaxing. There was something calm, almost chaste, about the place—white ceiling, blue mats, the pale sifted texture of the air and the soft smell of chalk where it whitened the holds, whose shapes and colors reminded me of Play-Doh. Most of all, I liked looking around and seeing bright lights, blocky shapes, reassured by these that, if Spider came for me, it would have nowhere to hide.

I juggled part-time jobs—four at once, for a while—and there was a phase of high-intensity partying. Our landlord wrote to say that he was hiking the rent by fifteen per cent. We counter-offered five. He served us a Section 21 notice, the legal mechanism to repossess his property. So we looked for somewhere else, a little farther out of town.

In one specific way, if in no other, I was glad of these distractions. There was a region in my mind which I did not want to look directly into. I hadn't been in touch with Fletcher since that night and did not know if his plan had succeeded.

It would not be accurate to say that I felt no guilt. But my memory of Spider, how it felt to be near it, holding it, whipped by it—the desire to escape all that outweighed my remorse. Not for nothing had I nixed a long friendship without so much as a goodbye. And although I justified this to myself in myriad ways—I had no choice and every right, it was better for Fletcher to learn how to do it himself—there was no way to spin it other than as a betrayal, one compounded by my subsequent ghosting. When Fletcher wrote me messages, which he did often, as he had since we'd met in the smoking area, I ignored them. Couldn't look at them. Same for his calls. And the long e-mail he wrote me, and the follow-up to that. Phone, social media, e-mail: in theory, Fletcher could reach me anywhere and at any time. But these forms of contact also have a feature called Block.



Which brings me to the second condition. Fletcher gave his blessing for me to tell his story as long as I not sugarcoat what I did. I abandoned my friend at a time of great need and on a cowardly whim. I was a piece of shit. The brute abruptness of my betrayal prompted even me to wonder whether I was a bit sociopathic. Telling Fletcher's story, as far as I understand it, then, is more penance than appropriation. Although Fletcher's still ashamed of Spider, my shame is worse, in his opinion. Picture me talking to you with my head and my hands in the stocks.

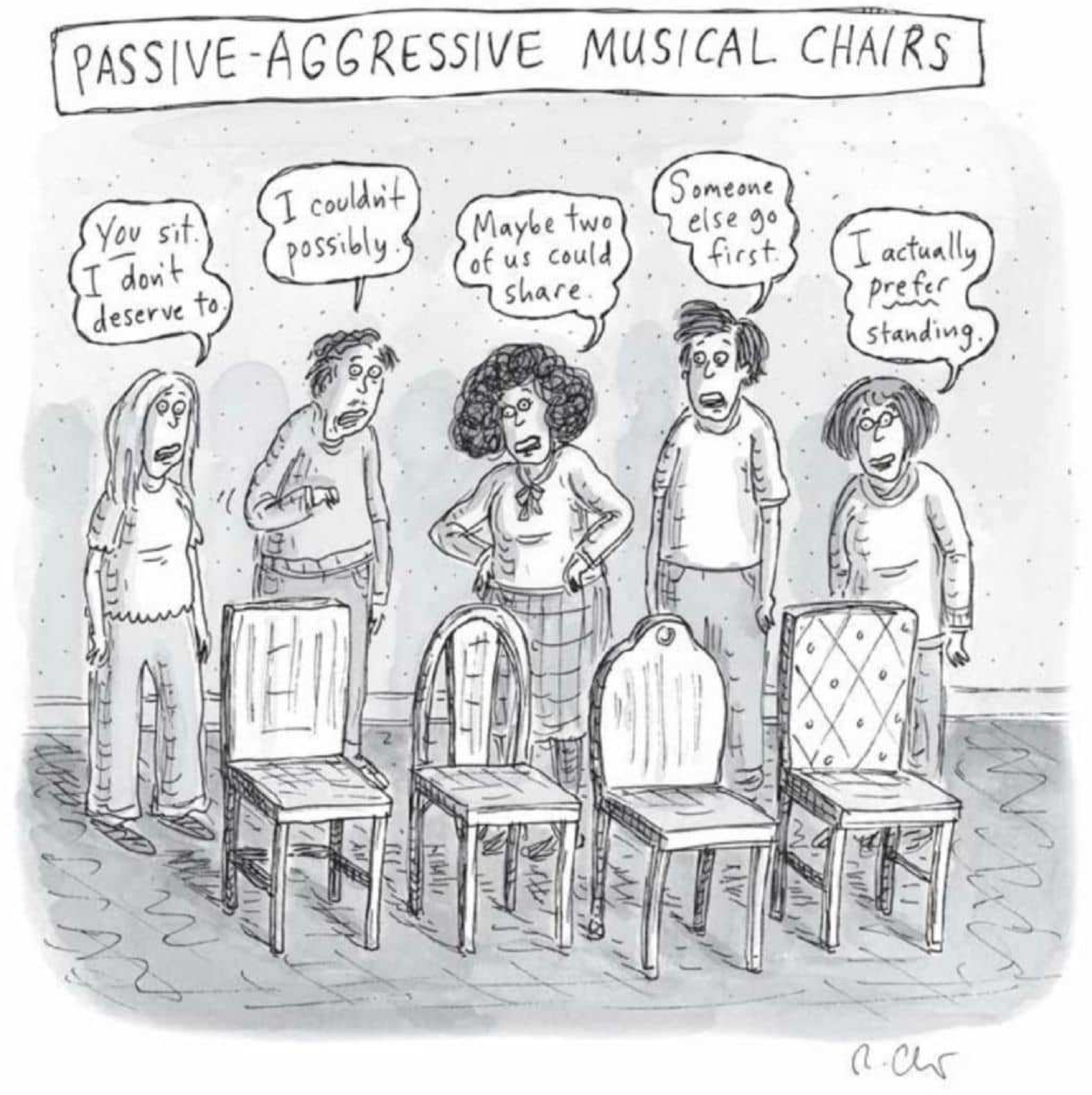
You will of course have deduced by now that Fletcher and I got back in touch, if for no other reason than for him to endorse the story. I am glad to report that our reunion, slow and painful as it has been, and very much a work in progress, has developed into more than an exchange of conditions. Muscles grow stronger by a series of tears and breakages, after all, and so I hope it proves with us. In the end, it wasn't a change of heart but a chance encounter that brought us together again.

It was winter by then. I hadn't seen Fletcher in months. He had given up trying to reach me. I thought about him every day, but whenever temptation arose to make contact again I persuaded myself to wait, he was better off without me, I would do it tomorrow, and so on. It was easy to avoid the few places we had haunted, especially with the friends I had made at the climbing wall, and the scale of the city is such that anonymity is the norm.

But then one evening in the aimless, half-dead days between Christmas and New Year's, I went for a walk along the river, icy weather, fog on the Thames, at the end of which I ducked into a backstreet pub I had never set foot in before. I noticed Fletcher a moment after he noticed me. He was standing in the corner at the bar. In his hands were two pints. He was staring with a look of such disdain, such triple-distilled contempt, that my body registered it with a jolt. I lifted my hand in a hesitant wave. Fletcher shook his head once. Twice. Then he turned his back and sat down at a table with a man I did not recognize.

Only now that I was in Fletcher's presence did I realize what a horrible idiot I had been, how crass and extreme my cruelty. I missed him. I wanted to know what had happened that night. And since speaking to him, without him approaching me first, would have been out of the question, I stole glances whenever I could.

From the look of him, it seemed the intervening months had been cruel. His face was drawn, he had lost more weight, and there were ashen patches under his wide dark eyes; frankly, he didn't look well. But something else had changed, too. There was a centeredness to his movements and to the sombre concentration of his eyes as he lifted the pint. I presumed that he had succeeded in his quest, that Spider was slain, and that the process had changed and toughened him, draped wisdom about his shoulders. I remember nothing of the rest of that evening, only how giddy and sick I felt to see Fletcher again.


PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE MUSICAL CHAIRS
You sit. I don't deserve to.
I couldn't possibly.
Maybe two of us could share.
Someone else go first.
I actually *prefer* standing.

I'll spare you a detailed account of the lengths to which I went to reestablish contact with Fletcher. Suffice to say that it was months before he replied to a message or answered a call and that, when at last he did, our first encounter did not go well. It barely went at all. Fletcher arrived, punched me in the neck, kicked me to the floor, spat on me, and left. After he was gone and my dizziness had lifted, I messaged him to say that, while that didn't make us even, it was a step in the right direction, and would he care to meet again?

In time, we had another meeting. Trees again: Dulwich Wood.

When he showed up—late, as he had been at the pub months before, at the start of it all—he had company. Prancing down the pavement behind him, bold as anything, was Spider.

I thought Fletcher might deck me again. He had that look about him. Instead, he held out his hand, and I shook it. Spider stood taller than either of us. Reflected on its domed head was a band of green leaves, like a crown of laurels. It looked exactly as it had the two times I'd seen it, not a scar in sight. When Fletcher and I set off into the woods, it scuttled into the undergrowth.

Fletcher was keen to stress how bad things had got for him after that night. He had succeeded in completing his plan without my help. He bundled Spider's pieces into nets, tied them to weights, drowned them in buckets filled with wet concrete, and let them dry overnight. The next morning, without having slept, and feeling like the world's most inept contract killer, he drove to a bridge and dropped them into the water, watching to see that they remained under, which they did. Returning home, he'd found his housemate standing furious in the corridor. Fletcher didn't know how to explain the ruination that had befallen not just his bedroom but the corridor and the bathroom. In panic or delirium, he attributed the mess to a "sex thing." The next day, Fletcher's flatmate ratted him out to their landlord. Fletcher was asked to leave.

"We could have found a place together," I said. Fletcher didn't find it amusing.

Spider had stayed away for a fortnight. After it returned (showing up in his room without fanfare), it was worse than ever. Unbroken sleep became a thing of the past. Spider jigged and sprinted where Fletcher lay, knocked him off his feet, and caused accidents when he was chopping onions or making tea, leaving bruises and minor burns that friends and colleagues started asking about. Now Spider flattened itself to Fletcher's chest every morning. At various points, it escaped, ran beside him like a dog. When this happened, people saw it. Some pulled back in disgust or alarm; others glazed over, as though they couldn't see it. A few—two, to be exact—whispered their encouragement or sympathy. They had seen things like Spider before, they hissed. If anything, Fletcher's was a medium-sized one, in any case he was hardly unique, wasn't the world itself a Spider factory? One older man encouraged Fletcher to join a support group online. When he did, Spider was with him, of course, mashing the keyboard, doing cartwheels and twirls in high vaudeville style, delighting in the expenditure of energy that seemed to rise in direct proportion to Fletcher's fatigue. When he tried to eat (cereal, mostly, the only thing he had the energy to make), Spider would knock the bowl onto the floor, then splosh about in the puddled milk. Hence Fletcher's malnourished appearance: this had gone on for weeks.

He could not ignore Spider, and he had given up trying to kill it, which allowed for a new relation, something akin to intimacy, death by kindness after all. Spider felt to Fletcher like a pet—it is more than possible to hate one's pet.

One night, rather than dance on Fletcher's body, Spider "showed me something," he said. "I don't know if it was where it came from, like its home planet or whatever, or if it was a vision from the future, or something inside me, or nothing—a dream."

Whatever it was, Spider wrapped its legs around Fletcher's head, blocking his vision. He found himself in midair. Far beneath him was what resembled an ocean at night, though it might have been an underground lake; in any event, a body of dark liquid, ink or oil, which glimmered faintly as it heaved. Fletcher began to sink toward it. (He had the sense that Spider was guiding him down, as though by a thread.) In time, he realized that the liquid, which until this point had looked calm, was in fact churning furiously, and that the water, which may have been the same substance that had escaped Spider's body that night, was alive with creatures such as it, a roiling sea of countless Spiders, a truly horrifying sight. They were thrashing and crawling and whirling about as far as the eye could see, and the image was so total, so inevitable, that it filled Fletcher with despair.

Before he made contact with that liquid storm, he woke up. It must have been a nightmare, he thought. But on waking he could see only darkness. Spider had grown to such an extent that it filled Fletcher's bedroom, blocking out the window, pinning him to the bed, so that he could not get up, could barely even move, which was not ideal, because he was due at the office in two hours. Luckily, if that word applies, his phone was charging right beside his bed, so he could pull a sickie. There was no way he could get out of bed, let alone to his front door, with what Fletcher referred to as a monstrous, sentient cannonball, crushing his legs into the mattress, letting him loose only to use the bathroom before hounding him back to the mattress again. This lasted a full workweek.

"That was a low point," Fletcher said.

The woods were beautiful in the spring, the undergrowth rash with new grass and young daffodils. Fletcher's head hung low. I thought he might weep. Instead, he laughed. He'd spotted Spider goofing around on a nearby path, and a dog was barking at it. We walked on. I felt an odd mixture of emotions. Guilt, shame, unavoidably those. But Fletcher wouldn't be telling me any of this if there wasn't hope that we could reconcile.

"But the *real* low point came," he said, "the night I went to Waterloo Bridge."

He had decided that there was only one way to end it. He had heard that drowning was a peaceful way to go, and that the currents that flow beneath the surface of the Thames at this point have such a barrelling propulsion to them that once you go under you don't come up alive. So he had set out for Waterloo around three on a Tuesday morning with a strangely elated feeling. He approached the—what to call it—railing? Parapet? As he stepped onto the concrete strip that ran along the side of the bridge, it occurred to him that he didn't know the proper word for the last solid thing he would stand on for the rest of his life, despite still working in a construction firm; the fact seemed in that moment hilarious. He peered down at the water below, the churning liquid in his nightmare, the dreamless sleep into which he hoped to fall. Soon Spider would no longer bother him.

He stood on the edge, whatever you called it, and was about to step forward.

"I couldn't do it. Then I noticed something next to me."

Spider had come along, of course, and was at his side. It seemed to be peering down at the water, just as Fletcher was. Seeing it was enough to break something, he said. He stepped back onto the pavement and sank to the ground, and Spider nuzzled his chest, at which point Fletcher realized, however odd or even sinister it sounded, that there was something comforting about Spider's presence. It had stayed with him, after all, when I had not.

That meeting was several months ago. It's summertime again. A year has passed since our trip to Kew Gardens. Fletcher remains, how to put it, cautious of going back to the way things were, doesn't seem to think it's possible, but we still meet up. He's toying with the idea of a show about what happened. Standup, perhaps. Fletcher has this idea that Spider could be his sidekick, goof about onstage. His working title: "Life with Spider." It might never get off the ground. If it does, he hopes that Spider can be persuaded to wear a porkpie hat.

For now, they go around town together. You might see them. If you do, don't be afraid. Or do. I was. Still am.

A curious thing has happened, Fletcher tells me. It might make this show of his impossible, at least in the form he had envisioned. Spider, he says, "isn't always present in the form it used to be."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that. When I asked him to explain, he told me that, sometimes, Spider expands to such an extent that it disappears. It becomes the sky. In doing so, it transposes itself into background, into atmosphere. All this sounded very gnomic to me. So I asked him, a second time, to explain just what he meant.

At which point, Fletcher told me something I've been puzzling over ever since. A statement so rudimentary, so banal, and yet so open to interpretation as to sound like a riddle or a koan. Perhaps you can make better sense of it than I can. We were standing outside. A few clouds had gathered. Fletcher had fallen silent, thinking over my question. Then he shrugged and said, "Sometimes it rains." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Patrick Langley on comedy and violence.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

PROMETHEUS BOUND

In search of a new and better Internet.

BY AKASH KAPUR

On a cold night in February of 1996, John Perry Barlow found himself at a party in Davos. It was the closing event of the World Economic Forum, and the ballroom was filled with besuited masters of the universe and students from the University of Geneva. He danced with them, a little inebriated. But a thought nagged at him.

Earlier that day, in Washington, D.C., President Clinton had signed a bill that would for the first time bring the Internet under a degree of government control. The Communications Decency Act (C.D.A.), part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, included a provision that would criminalize "obscene" or "indecent" content on the Internet. In Congress, the Nebraska senator James Exon, who had co-sponsored the C.D.A., issued a dire warning: "Barbarian pornographers are at the gate, and they are using the Internet to gain access to the youth of America." As evidence, he circulated a blue binder filled with pornographic material collected online, including an image of a man

People once believed in the liberatory capacities of the Internet; now tech companies themselves are calling for more regulations.

ILLUSTRATION BY TILL LAUER

having sex with a German shepherd.

Barlow, a former cattle rancher from Wyoming, a sometime lyricist for the Grateful Dead, and a libertarian activist on the Internet, was convinced that the fledgling network should remain free of government interference. Incensed by what he would call a "stunningly dumb bit of legislation," he set up a makeshift office adjacent to the party and, shuttling back and forth between his computer and the ballroom, banged out an eight-hundred-and-fifty-word manifesto. Barlow's "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" would soon—in a term that gained currency only later—go viral. It is now recognized as a seminal document in the history of the Internet: a preamble to a constitution that the network would never formally have.

"Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind," the manifesto began. "On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather."

Like so many constitutional provisions these days, Barlow's "Declaration" has recently come under considerable strain. Critics denounce it as an exemplar of techno-utopianism, enabling the uncontrolled, mob-fuelled Internet we have today. The years have not proved kind to Barlow's vision of "a civilization of the Mind," more "humane and fair." Amid the scandals concerning privacy, misinformation, polarization, threats to teen-age mental health, and even complicity in genocide, the radiant future that Barlow foresaw has given way to what the activist and writer Cory Doctorow calls the "enshittification" of the Internet.

In fact, for all Barlow's outrage, governments remained mostly hands-off during the Internet's early history. Clinton may have signed the C.D.A., but his real attitude was summed up by his statement that regulating the Internet was like "trying to nail Jello to the wall." Large parts of the C.D.A. were later invalidated by the Supreme Court on First Amendment grounds, and buried within the act itself was a clause that has over the years come to emblematize the long leash granted to the Internet: Section 230 of the act protects online platforms from liability for content created by their users.

During the past decade or so, however, governments around the world have grown impatient with the notion of Internet autarky. A trickle of half-hearted interventions has built into what the legal scholar Anu Bradford calls a "cascade of regulation." In "Digital Empires" (Oxford), her comprehensive and insightful book on global Internet policy, she describes a series of skirmishes—between regulators and companies, and among regulators themselves—whose outcomes will "shape the future ethos of the digital society and define the soul of the digital economy."

Other recent books echo this sense of the network as being at a critical juncture. Tom Wheeler, a former chairman of the F.C.C., argues in "Techlash: Who Makes the Rules in the Digital Gilded Age?" (Brookings) that we are at "a legacy moment for this generation to determine whether, and how, it will assert the public interest in the new digital environment." In "The Internet Con" (Verso), Doctorow makes a passionate case for "relief from manipulation, high-handed moderation, surveillance, price-gouging, disgusting or misleading algorithmic suggestions"; he argues that it is time to "dismantle Big Tech's control over our digital lives and devolve control to the people." In "Read Write Own" (Random House), Chris Dixon, a venture capitalist, says that a network dominated by a handful of private interests "is neither the internet I want to see nor the world I wish to live in." He writes, "Think about how much of your life you live online, how much of your identity resides there. . . . Whom do you want in control of that world?"

Questions of control have always hovered over the Internet. Its decentralized architecture has long been key to its identity, wielded as a form of originalist rhetoric against any suggestion of external intervention. The roots of this architecture are, in fact, somewhat murky—attributed, variously, to an effort at sharing computing resources more efficiently, a nineteen-sixties confluence of technocracy and hippie anarchism, and the search for a network design that could withstand nuclear attack (a claim disputed by some Internet veterans). In the 1999 memoir "Weaving the Web," Tim Berners-Lee, often called the father of the World Wide Web, likened the network's principles to those upheld by his Unitarian Universalist church—individualism, peer-to-peer relationships, "philosophies that allow decentralized systems."

In truth, the notion of a fully decentralized network has always been something of a myth. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which has been described as the "secret government of the Internet," has long managed a directory—the Domain Name System, or D.N.S.—that the Internet needs in order to function. (For Berners-Lee, the D.N.S. was a "centralized Achilles' heel" that could bring the network down.) Until 2016, ICANN was under the authority of the U.S. Department of Commerce. In a 2006 book titled "Who Controls the Internet?," the law professors Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu described "the death of the dream of self-governing cybercommunities," and argued that governments had an array of means at their disposal with which to enforce their laws in cyberspace, even if imperfectly.

In retrospect, the real problem with the cyberspace-sovereignty argument was simply that it was blinkered. Early Internet activists like Barlow were so focussed on the risks of government intervention that they failed to anticipate the threats posed by private-sector control. This was perhaps unsurprising. Barlow was writing amid the end-of-history glow produced by the collapse of Communism, his techno-utopianism a variation of the era's market utopianism. The mood has shifted considerably since then. Today's digital activists came of age in the shadow of 2008; they tend to call for government intervention, in order to rescue the Internet from what the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis calls "technofeudalism," in a book by that title.

The dramatic rise of generative artificial intelligence has only accelerated calls for government intervention—and, significantly, these calls are often coming from within the industry. Sam Altman, the recently reinstated head of OpenAI, went before Congress last spring and essentially demanded regulation; Elon Musk has called for a federal department of A.I. In "The Coming Wave" (Crown), Mustafa Suleyman, a co-founder of DeepMind and of Inflection, two leading A.I. companies, argues that government intervention is necessary to protect us from the technology's enormous risks. ("At some stage, in some form, something, somewhere, will fail," he writes, in what's generally a judicious account. "And this won't be a Bhopal or even a Chernobyl; it will unfold on a worldwide scale.")

Activists have every reason to hope that A.I. anxieties will bolster their efforts at Internet governance. Yet they're so attuned to the difficulties of the present that their remedies may do little to nurture a broader set of values—freedom, solidarity, equitable access to resources—that the Internet once promised to advance. The perils of the libertarian approach are now clear; we may soon be learning the costs of reflexive statism. More than a thousand A.I. policy initiatives across sixty-nine countries have lately been documented. In the U.S., some thirty states are debating (or have already enacted) digital-privacy bills, adding to federal oversight by agencies such as the F.T.C. and the S.E.C.

"Look, Dave, I can see you're really upset about this," HAL, the digital brain in Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," tells his human minder, in a tone that calls to mind the bland neutrality of today's chatbots. "I honestly think you ought to sit down calmly, take a stress pill, and think things over." In the movie, Dave is right to fear the worst. Amid the rush to regulate, though, HAL's advice might be worth taking.

"It's not really standard procedure, but, yes, I can let the other applicants know you've licked every surface in the apartment."

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In "American Capitalism" (1952), the first volume in a trilogy on economics, John Kenneth Galbraith outlined his notion of "countervailing power." He was living in a time—much like our own—of rising corporate concentration and faltering competition; at such moments, Galbraith argued, markets could not be relied upon to police themselves. The solution he favored was a form of ecological balance: forces such as trade unions and consumer coalitions would act as a constraint. "Private economic power is held in check by the countervailing power of those who are subject to it," Galbraith wrote. "The first begets the second."

The past decade has seen the search for a countervailing power to offset the mighty tug of commercial interests. As Galbraith noted, government is not the only—or even the preferred—option; various other ideas have been mooted. In "Internet for the People" (Verso), Ben Tarnoff calls for a "deprivatized" Internet with new "models of public and co-operative ownership"; in "Own This!" (Verso), R. Trebor Scholz likewise explores the potential of worker-and-user-owned "platform co-ops." (He discusses, although does not endorse, the idea of nationalizing large companies like Amazon and Facebook.) Dixon, in "Read Write Own," reverts to a form of technological purism, resting his hopes in the potential of blockchain. The trouble is that, after more than a decade of casting about for checks on Big Tech, the only countervailing power seemingly able to muster the required heft and legitimacy is the nation-state.

But the law is a blunt instrument. Despite an emerging consensus about the need for governance, policymakers, businesspeople, and citizens are left grappling with regulation's numerous shortcomings. There's the common, and not entirely unfounded, concern that regulation stifles innovation ("More upstream governance translates to less downstream innovation" as Andrew McAfee put it), and a growing recognition of what is known as law's distributive effect—the fact that smaller companies are often disproportionately hit by the costs of regulatory compliance. In 2016, when Europe adopted the landmark G.D.P.R. (General Data Protection Regulation), Facebook, now Meta, is said to have hired some thousand people to help it comply. Such actions are well beyond the means of most businesses, especially startups; policies designed to weaken market concentration may actually strengthen it.

The sheer scope—and sprawl—of the regulatory onslaught is surely part of the problem, too. The theory of countervailance relies on a certain equilibrium: various forces operate together—sometimes in conjunction, sometimes in opposition—to maintain balance in the marketplace. But the pendulum of history swings wide; after decades of virtually unchecked corporate power, we may now be entering an equally pernicious period of regulatory free-for-all. The landscape of global digital governance is today characterized by a hodgepodge of overreaching, overlapping, and often contradictory laws, many more performative than substantive.

Consider the slew of European privacy regulations responsible for all those Whac-A-Mole cookie warnings which, it's increasingly clear, do little to protect user data. Other measures have the flavor of New England's nineteenth-century Watch and Ward Society. In Utah, legislators have proposed nighttime curfews on the use of social media by minors (the first "state-run internet bedtime," as Gizmodo put it); in Arkansas, Virginia, and other states, suggested identity-verification requirements on porn sites, again aimed at minors, have raised concerns about the privacy rights of legitimate users. And governments, having promised to protect our information from corporate exploitation, now seem intent on maintaining their own peepholes. France recently passed a bill to let police remotely activate microphones, G.P.S. devices, and cameras on phones; the E.U. is considering mandating message providers (like WhatsApp and Signal) to enable "client-side scanning," which would allow automated scrutiny of private communications. Surveillance capitalism, it seems, is reverting to good old-fashioned surveillance.

In "Digital Empires," Bradford tries valiantly to impose some coherence on this distended terrain. She considers the efflorescence of Internet laws as part of a wider struggle for global power in an emerging multipolar world. As she sees it, the disparate strands of lawmaking can be grouped into three regulatory regimes, or competing "digital empires." Despite some recent shifts, the U.S. continues largely to advocate for the Internet's original "market-driven model"; China's "state-driven model" represents a transposition of its general authoritarianism to the online realm; and the E.U.'s "rights-driven model" seeks to chart something of a middle way, more proactive and risk-averse than America's but also more mindful of privacy and individual rights than China's. Each approach corresponds, broadly, to a different calibration between the countervailing powers of nation-state and private enterprise.

As an analytical framework, this categorization is compelling, though it has worrisome implications. For years, opponents of regulation have warned about the dangers of a Splinternet—the prospect that state assertions of digital sovereignty could Balkanize the network into incompatible fiefdoms. Their dire predictions have mostly not been borne out; the core architecture of the network, its ability to transport data packets around the world, has remained essentially intact, governed by technocratic consensus in international standards bodies like the Internet Engineering Task Force and the International Telecommunication Union. But, as the Internet becomes increasingly intertwined with the unstable geopolitics of our era, the future appears more perilous.

That became clear one day in Geneva in September, 2019, when, as the *Financial Times* reported, a group of Chinese engineers entered the headquarters of the I.T.U. and gave a PowerPoint presentation to delegates from some forty countries. The engineers unveiled a futuristic vision of a reinvented Internet—"New I.P.," or Internet Protocol—which had been conceived by representatives from the Chinese private and public sectors. New I.P. represented a "top-down" network that would enable capabilities such as "holographic communications" and a "tactile Internet." It would also allow for something called ManyNets, permitting the Internet to be broken up into distinct networks that could be controlled by individual nations. One of the touted benefits of this new protocol was the ability to implement "shut-up commands" that would block users from a network.

The proposal, part of a bigger push for what Xi Jinping has called a more "sovereign" Internet, was supported by Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, among other countries. The E.U., the United States, and various technical bodies (including the I.E.T.F.) stood in opposition. The simmering divisions came to a head in 2022, during the election for the post of secretary-general of the I.T.U., which pitted Rashid Ismailov, a Russian official who had worked at Huawei, against Doreen Bogdan-Martin, a former U.S. Department of Commerce official. Bogdan-Martin won the election, and the threat of New I.P. appears to have receded, at least for now. But, for a moment, the Internet as we know it appeared to hang in the balance. An apparently arcane dispute over technology standards was really part of the clash between two very dif-

DINGHY IN A BOTTLE
Kanin

"Howard isn't very ambitious."

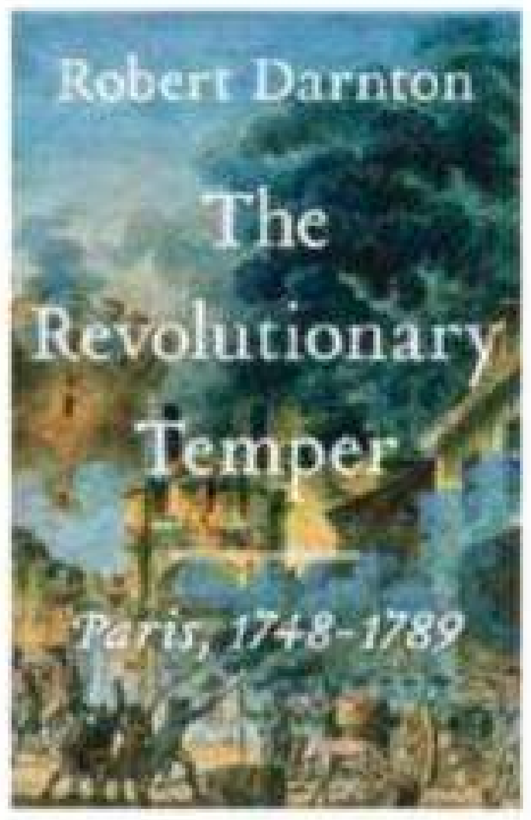
ferent visions of the economy, society, and the relationship between citizens and state in the digital era.

The story of the Internet usually focusses on the United States and Europe, with a few recent cameos from China. Yet India is the key player in another approach that's currently spreading across the so-called Global South, in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. As the journalist and academic Nalin Mehta writes in his recent book, "India's Techade" (Westland), India has, in the past decade or so, launched a digital revolution "unlike any that came before"—one that started quietly but has recently gone "viral on a scale that is unprecedented." India's digital stack, as the basic technology is known, may ultimately shape the future of the Internet far more significantly than the efforts of Western regulators.

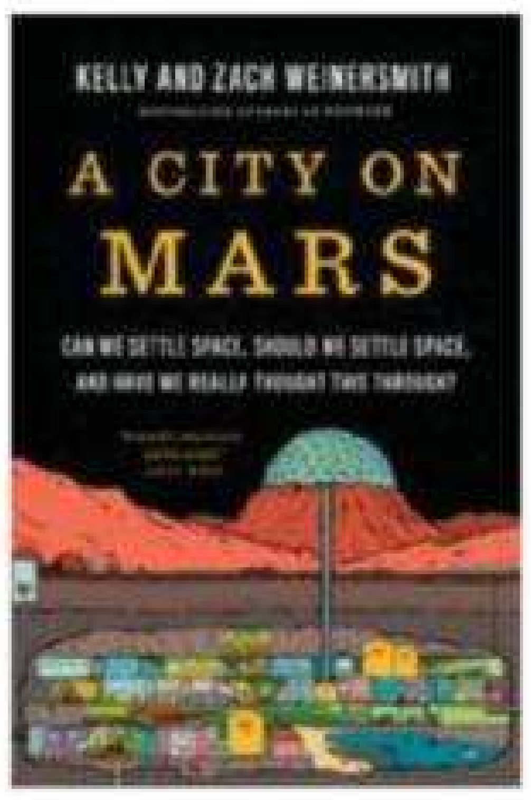
The origins of this technology can be traced to the state's long-standing desire to create a national I.D. system, in part to reduce "leakage" (less politely, corruption-related losses) in its delivery of welfare. As Shankkar Aiyar reported in "Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12-Digit Revolution," such ideas had been kicked around in the bureaucracy for many years. Then, in May, 2009, Rahul Gandhi, the scion of India's leading political family, and a key figure in the then ruling Congress Party, sent a text to the Indian entrepreneur and billionaire Nandan Nilekani, asking him to fly to New Delhi. Nilekani soon joined the cabinet as head of a new digital-identity program, known as the Unique Identification Authority of India.

At an elementary level, the program was simply an effort to create something akin to a Social Security number—no small achievement in a country as large as India, but hardly revolutionary on its own merits. Under Nilekani's guidance, the program has overcome public skepticism, bureaucratic inertia, and legal challenges to sign up 1.4 billion citizens. Each now possesses a twelve-digit identity number, known as an Aadhaar (Hindi for "foundation"), which is linked to biometric information such as iris scans and fingerprints. But Nilekani's real achievement has been to use the I.D. numbers as the underpinnings of an integrated digital ecology ("the stack"). It consists of government-enabled modules (collectively

BRIEFLY NOTED



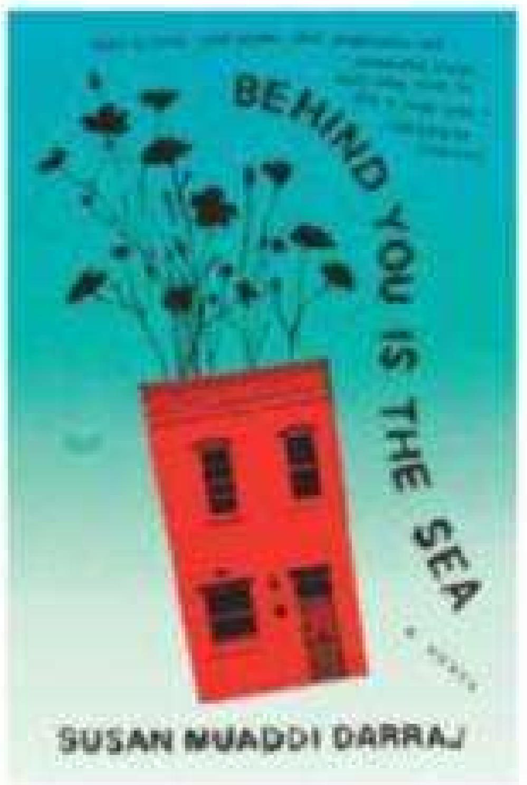
The Revolutionary Temper, *by Robert Darnton (Norton)*. In the final forty years of the ancien régime, Paris was gripped by drama, involving, among other things, royal affairs, riots over bread prices and ministerial despotism, and public demonstrations of innovations like the hot-air balloon. Darnton, a historian at Harvard, plumbs diaries, news reports, and popular songs to show how these events, combined with Enlightenment ideals, were digested by the city's robust media culture to fuel a burgeoning sense of citizen sovereignty. By the start of the French Revolution, he writes, these stirrings had crystallized into a "revolutionary temper": "a conviction that the human condition is malleable, not fixed, and that ordinary people can make history instead of suffering it."



A City on Mars, *by Kelly and Zach Weinersmith (Penguin Press)*. This playful "homesteader's guide" to space settlement presents a bleak view of the pursuit, arguing that "an Earth with climate change and nuclear war . . . is still a way better place than Mars." The authors examine the increasingly popular dream of a multi-planetary human race with a skepticism informed by ethical, logistical, and legal anxieties. They warn that the Martian landscape is whipped by "poison storms"; that space exploration without clearer laws could escalate into a "zero-sum scramble" for resources; and that science has barely grazed the unknowns of long-term extraterrestrial habitation.

THE GRAVEDIGGERS' GUILD
MATHIAS ÉNARD

The Annual Banquet of the Gravediggers' Guild, *by Mathias Énard, translated from the French by Frank Wynne (New Directions)*. This novel's relatively conventional premise—an anthropology student moves to a provincial village to conduct research—belies the bizarre fantasia that unfolds in its pages, in which moments across history occur simultaneously. The student mingles with his new neighbors, has cybersex with his girlfriend back in the city, and dallies on his thesis; meanwhile, around him, the turning of the wheel keeps life and death in a constant churn. Énard charts the arcs of his characters in their current, past, and future incarnations—as farmers, murderers, monks, bedbugs, boars, and ash trees. The concept, if esoteric, provides a feast of pathos and pleasure, and a shimmering argument for the interconnectedness of everything.



Behind You Is the Sea, *by Susan Muaddi Darraj (HarperVia)*. Composed of linked stories, this novel explores the lives of Palestinian Americans in Baltimore. At a young man's wedding to a white woman, his father agonizes over the gradual loss of the family's cultural identity. A student finds that her objections to her high school's production of "Aladdin" fall on willfully deaf ears. Elsewhere, girls and women are shunned for getting pregnant, or for being unable to bear children. Darraj writes with great emotional resonance about hope and disappointment. "His mouth opens in an O, like America has shocked him at last," a girl says of her Palestinian-born father's dying breath. "It's like he finally understood he was never meant to win here."

referred to as digital public infrastructure, or D.P.I.) that allow citizens to make online payments, receive welfare, conduct banking, and store and certify official documents (e.g., COVID-vaccine certificates). The government, in this way, is building what the World Bank calls "plumbing" for a more controlled—and possibly less toxic—version of the Internet, leaving space for private developers to build platforms and services on top of it.

Ten billion or so payments take place every month in the stack, accounting for almost half of the entire world's real-time digital payments. The technology has enabled trillions of dollars in commercial activity, and is estimated to have saved around thirty-four billion dollars between 2013 and 2021 by impeding corruption. Beyond numbers, the stack's impact is increasingly visible in daily life. Mehta's book is filled with human stories that vividly illustrate technocratic terms like "financial inclusion" and "leapfrog development." There's Lakshmi, a fifty-eight-year-old widow, who uses her Aadhaar card and thumbprint to access a monthly pension of eight hundred rupees. There's the village of Saharanpur, where government money for purchasing new toilets and even homes is directly deposited into residents' accounts, thus cutting out grasping middlemen. And there are a multitude of small venders—fruit sellers, rural tea shops, thatched roadside restaurants—that now take payments via cell-phone-scanned QR codes, changing the way Indians conduct commerce. Such scenes, familiar to anyone who might have recently visited India, explain why the digital stack has been compared, in its potential consequences, to the Green Revolution of the nineteen-sixties.

As impressive as the stack has been for India, though, its most significant impact may turn out to be global. A growing number of countries, mostly in the Global South, either have started using elements of the stack or are considering doing so. The Philippines has issued digital I.D.s powered by Indian technology to seventy-six million of its hundred and ten million people; a pilot program in Morocco has enrolled seven million citizens. Singapore and the U.A.E. have connected their domestic payment networks to the Indian one. Jamaica used the stack to issue COVID-vaccine certificates. For India, the stack represents an opportunity to project soft power and position itself as a global player—alongside China, the E.U., and the U.S. It wasn't so long ago that the country was being hailed as the land of nonviolence and a birthplace of spirituality; in the twenty-first century, there's a growing sense that, in the words of Satya Nadella, Microsoft's C.E.O., the "magic of India Stack . . . is perhaps the greatest contribution that India can make to the world."

The stack isn't typically included in discussions of Internet policy (Bradford, for example, doesn't mention it in her book); the complex interplay of technology, government, and private enterprise fits uneasily within the classic paradigm of regulation. But the stack is, in fact, emerging as another model for how countervailance between the private sector and the state can shape the digital world, perhaps productively. One way to think about the stack is as a publicly run app store, where the government (rather than private companies) sets the rules for developers, and where those developers, in turn, build their services in a manner that, at least in theory, is safer and more compatible with the public good than the Internet we have today. As Nilekani has put it, India's approach offers a "new model of how citizens relate to the Internet"—a potential reworking of the digital social contract, a reordering of power so that it is more equitably distributed among citizens, the state, and the private sector.

Some of this is aspirational, of course; the stack is still evolving, and much depends on the benevolence (and the competence) of the state. India's model is not without its critics, who point to the potential for surveillance and intrusive law enforcement, especially amid perceptions of an erosion in the country's civil liberties. In a 2018 ruling, the Indian Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of using Aadhaar to deliver welfare payments, even while urging the government to "plug the loopholes" in the system. There have been reports of data leaks, and civil-society organizations worry about the ways in which less tech-literate citizens could be left out. These are the perils, in various iterations, and across jurisdictions, of the nation-state's newfound determination to assert authority in the digital realm. A great rebalancing is under way; a new Internet may slowly be coming into view.

When was the Internet born? It depends on one's definition of the Internet, but a plausible case could be made for the year 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee, then a fellow at CERN, the physics research lab outside Geneva, submitted to his supervisor a document titled "Information Management: A Proposal," effectively producing the blueprint for the realm of clickable links known as the World Wide Web. The supervisor returned the document with one line of feedback scrawled across the top: "Vague but exciting . . ."

His assessment remains true; the Internet is still full of promise but nebulous in its contours. There's a reason that the current debate over its control is so fraught. How the Internet is governed—and who does the governing—will determine what the Internet is. The stakes in the ongoing tussle between nation-states and markets are, in other words, not merely managerial; they are also existential.

Will the Internet harden into an oligarchic playground, or will it become the tamer (and perhaps less innovative) place envisioned by European regulators, something akin to a digital public utility? Will large sections of it eventually bend to the power of tyrants and illiberal populists, determined to stamp out what Xi Jinping has castigated as the network's "hidden negative energy"? Or will the more consequential influence be the model that India is pioneering, a walled garden in which private enterprise is allowed to flourish, but within confines established by the state?

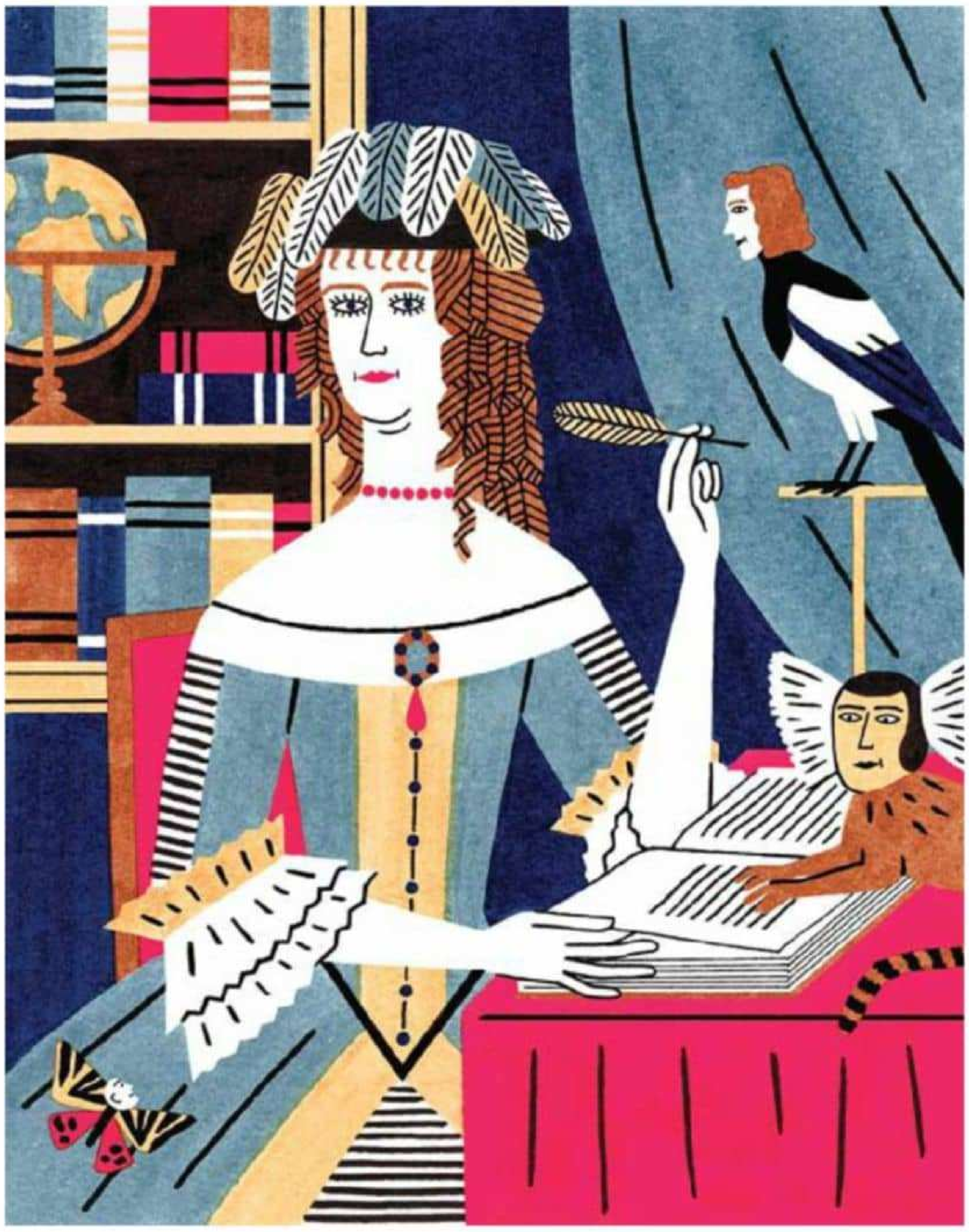
The answer may at least partly lie in how—and where—the Internet is being used. In 1996, when Barlow wrote his manifesto, there were some eighty million Internet users around the world, eighty per cent of whom lived in North America and Europe. Today, there are more than five billion people on the Internet, roughly two-thirds of them from countries in the Global South. India and China now account for about half the world's mobile-data traffic; the fastest-growing population of users is in Africa. The Internet remains a work in progress. But there's reason to think that its future is being written in a very different place than its past was. ♦

BOOKS

MAD, CONCEITED, RIDICULOUS

Why Margaret Cavendish was considered both a genius and an eccentric.

BY MERVE EMRE



"I Write to Please my Self," Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, declared in her "Orations of Divers Sorts" (1662). A shy, solitary woman with a passion for poetry and scientific inquiry—what did she see when she peered inside "Natures Cabinet, the Braine"? She saw "*Fans* of *Opinion*," "*Gloves* of *Remembrance*, *Veiles* of *Forgetfulnesse*," "*Pendants* of *Understanding*" to adorn the ears of the wisest women. She saw "*Black Patches* of *Ignorance*, to stick on/The *Face* of *Fooles*." Brightest of all were the "*Ribbons* of *Fancies*." By "fancy," she meant the wild, inventive faculty of the mind which allowed her to see forgetfulness as a veil or the brain as a cabinet in the first place.

From her cabinet tumbled some of the strangest prose and verse of the seventeenth century, beginning, in 1653, with her "Poems, and Fancies":

When *Nature* first this World she did create,
She cal'd a Counsell how the same might make;
Motion was first, who had a subtle wit,
And then came *Life*, and *Forme*, and *Matter* fit.

Do not be fooled by these sweet couplets. They were the prelude to an enormously ambitious philosophy of nature's diffuse, uneasy vitality. Across almost three hundred poems, Cavendish speculated about how atoms joined to form everything in the world, from a fire's stinging spark to the broad boughs of an oak tree. Look around, her poems urged: at the air, the mist, the wind, and the water. Listen to each proclamation of mirth and melancholy, love and hate. What is it made of? How does it change? What are the smallest and largest scales at which consciousness exists? Her answers to these questions evolved in three scientific treatises, "Philosophical and Physical Opinions," "Philosophicall Fancies," and "Natures Pictures." Published at the frantic pace of almost a book a year, they advanced a formidable theory of matter and its motions.

Cavendish's "The Blazing World" may be the first work of science fiction.

The Duchess was a vanishingly rare creature: a self-taught natural philosopher writing in the decades when natural philosophy was developing into what we now call science, a professionalized field that would embrace the new disciplines of astronomy, geography, mathematics, and physics. She also belonged to an emergent species: the female intellectual. At a time when women were not formally educated, she was one of the first women to publish poetry under her own name, and may well have been the first to produce a scientific treatise. Boldly, she sent her books to the dons of Oxford and Cambridge and to the learned men of the Royal Society. Some applauded her enthusiasm. Others offered faint or backhanded praise. "Your *NATURAL Philosophy*; it is ingenious and free, and may be, for ought I know, Excellent," the royal physician wrote to her, adding that he had not discovered much in that philosophy "wherein I think my self obliged to acquiesce." The most skeptical suggested that she had not written her own books. The cruellest pronounced her mad. Eventually, a nickname emerged: Mad Madge.

The books that followed "Poems, and Fancies" were prefaced by her apologies, some sincere and some in jest. She begged her reader's pardon for the stupidity of her sex, her ambition, and her desire for fame. She explained that men's formal education had taught them to be artificial, deforming their creativity and deluding them as to the true nature of knowledge. Their received forms could not accommodate the freshness and vigor of her thought. This left

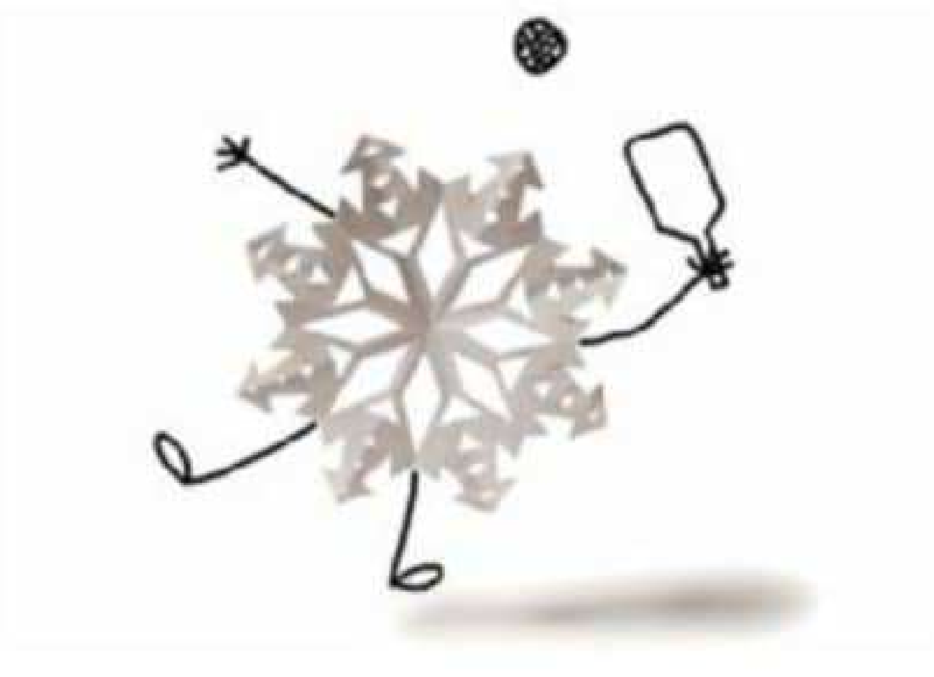
ILLUSTRATION BY FANNY BLANC

her no choice but to become a writer of many firsts. Her tale "The Blazing World" is often celebrated as the first work of science fiction. Her "Life of William Cavendish," about her husband, may be the first biography by a woman written in English. Her "True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life" was the first secular autobiography by an English woman.

"Tis probable, some will say, that my much writing is a disease," she warned. "I do verily believe they will take it to be a disease of the brain." Gossip about her spread; her reputation as a genius and an eccentric grew, as did interest in the particulars of her dress and comportment. Who was this woman who sent such demanding yet whimsical books to the finest libraries in England? "The whole story of this lady is a romance, and all she do is romantick," Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary in April, 1667. "All the town-talk is now-a-days of her extravagancies." When she visited London, a hundred boys and girls chased after her coach. When she was invited to the Royal Society, Pepys examined her closely: "The Duchesse hath been a good, comely woman; but her dress so antick, and her deportment so ordinary, that I do not like her at all, nor did I hear her say any thing that was worth hearing." He judged her "a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman."

She may have written only to please herself, and she may have failed to please Pepys, but her extravagances spurred others to write. It is impossible to imagine Aphra Behn translating Bernard de Fontenelle's "Discovery of New Worlds" without the example of "The Blazing World," or George Eliot arguing, in "Daniel Deronda," that poetry and romance can "exist very easily in the same room with the microscope." Virginia Woolf's feverish sentences owe a great deal to Cavendish, an ancestress whom Woolf described as "noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and bird-witted." In the past half century, the hunt for women to diversify the canon of early modern literature has prompted scholars to claim Cavendish as one of their own, according to contemporary fashions and tastes. Her writing has been resurrected as "proto-feminist," in the nineteen-eighties and nineties; as lesbian, in the two-thousands; and, in recent years, as ecofeminist and asexual. None of these labels captures what was originally astonishing about her.

To read Francesca Peacock's diligent and measured biography of Cavendish, "Pure Wit" (Pegasus), is to become aware of how little one can confidently claim to know about her. The year of her birth is disputed, 1623 or 1624.



The details of her early life are hazed with romance. Her father, a minor landowner named Thomas Lucas, died during her infancy, leaving her noble, thrifty mother to manage the family's estate, in Essex. Margaret and her seven brothers and sisters were raised "virtuously, modestly, civilly, honourably, and on honest principles," she writes in "A True Relation." In the winter, they amused themselves with plays and coach rides. In the spring, they supped aboard barges on the water. Their life of idle happiness ended in 1642, when local villagers, encouraged by Parliament's defiance of King Charles I, seized the Lucases' land and ransacked their house. There are no records of how Margaret escaped or where she first fled. She ended up in London, as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria. When the Queen's court went into exile in France, she went with it.

The English Civil War, which led to the execution of the King, launched the defining movements of Margaret's life. These one can track in her autobiography without being able to trace any true emotion excited by them; a chill of circumspection seeps into the tone. In Paris, she met the defeated Royalist commander William Cavendish, Marquess of Newcastle, a widower with five children and a passion for training horses. Before the war rendered him almost destitute, he had been a playwright and a generous patron, supporting the work of Ben Jonson and Thomas Hobbes. His letters to Margaret are embarrassing to read—"Now you're in bed / with trembling maidenhood"—whereas hers are, naturally enough, concerned with avoiding a "scandall of reputation." They married in 1645 and later moved to Antwerp, where they lived for ten years while the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell ruled England. Her autobiography reveals little about their time in exile. A letter to her husband from his physician suggests that she was unable to conceive a child; she suffered from "hypochondry," he wrote, a strain of "melancholy" that would make it "hard to get children with good courage." It was in Antwerp that she began to write, seriously and compulsively.

The shifting, unstable times gave her thought its central theme. She wanted to understand motion—how things moved themselves from one place to another; how they were moved by external forces; and how the whole of a thing, whether a body or a nation, could be composed and divided through the movements of its parts. Amid the calamities of the Civil War, motion had emerged as the concept that linked natural philosophy to political theory. "In the motion of naturall bodies, three things are to be considered," Thomas Hobbes wrote in his 1642 treatise, "De Cive." "The *internall disposition*, that they be susceptible of the motion to be produced; the *externall Agent*, whereby a certain and determined motion may in act be produced; and the *action it selfe*." Surely a similar theory of motion applied to collectives as well, especially "when the subjects begin to raise tumults," he wrote, anatomizing how opinions "contrary to Peace" might spread through a populace and split it into factions.

"De Cive" was translated from Latin into English in 1651; by then, the Cavendishes were living in Antwerp, but Hobbes had been their regular dinner guest during their time in Paris. "I never spake to Master *Hobbes* twenty words in my life," Margaret protested in "Philosophical and Physical Opinions," claiming that she had read "De Cive" "but once." One suspects that she was inclined to exaggerate her ignorance, either to mask her ambition or to stress her originality. Whatever her intention, she had absorbed Hobbes's belief that grasping the motions of natural bodies could bring order to the actions of political ones. Her poem "Of the *Subtlety* of *Motion*" suggested that it could even secure peace:

> Could we the severall *Motions* of *Life* know,
> The Subtle windings, and the waies they go:
> We should adore *God* more, and not dispute,
> How they are done, but that great *God* can doe't.

Yet her materialism was considerably less mechanical than Hobbes's division of motion into internal and external components. All of nature and everything in it, Cavendish held, was a completely indivisible mixture of two ingredients, animate and inanimate matter. The animate parts of matter were "self-moving and active"—the stuff of rational thought and sensitive feeling. The inanimate, or "grosser," parts were inert and passive. The animate was the source of motion, whereas the inanimate slowed motion and shaped it into forms.

Her analogy—a painful one, perhaps—was the conception of a child. If nature were purely animate, she wrote, "a Child in the Womb would as suddenly be framed, as it is figured in the mind." To think of a child would be to have a child. Yet having a child required that the inanimate parts of matter be formed into distinctive figures and patterns, through "infinite changes, compositions, divisions, productions, dissolutions." Through these changes, the child learned to walk and to speak; by degrees, the child grew and aged and, eventually, died.

Since animate and inanimate matter were mingled, it made no sense to separate the internal dispositions of bodies from the external agents that acted on them, as Hobbes had done. Nor did it make sense to think in atomic terms, as Cavendish had done in her earliest work. All matter was suffused by a single, infinite, and self-knowing motion. It was also governed by a single will. This was "Natures wisdom; for Nature being peaceable in her self, would not suffer her actions to disturb her Government," she wrote. Against a brutish, divisive vision of both natural and political bodies, her philosophies tended toward peace rather than factionalism, toward coöperation rather than insurrection. Most important, they suggested the desirability of benevolent monarchical rule.

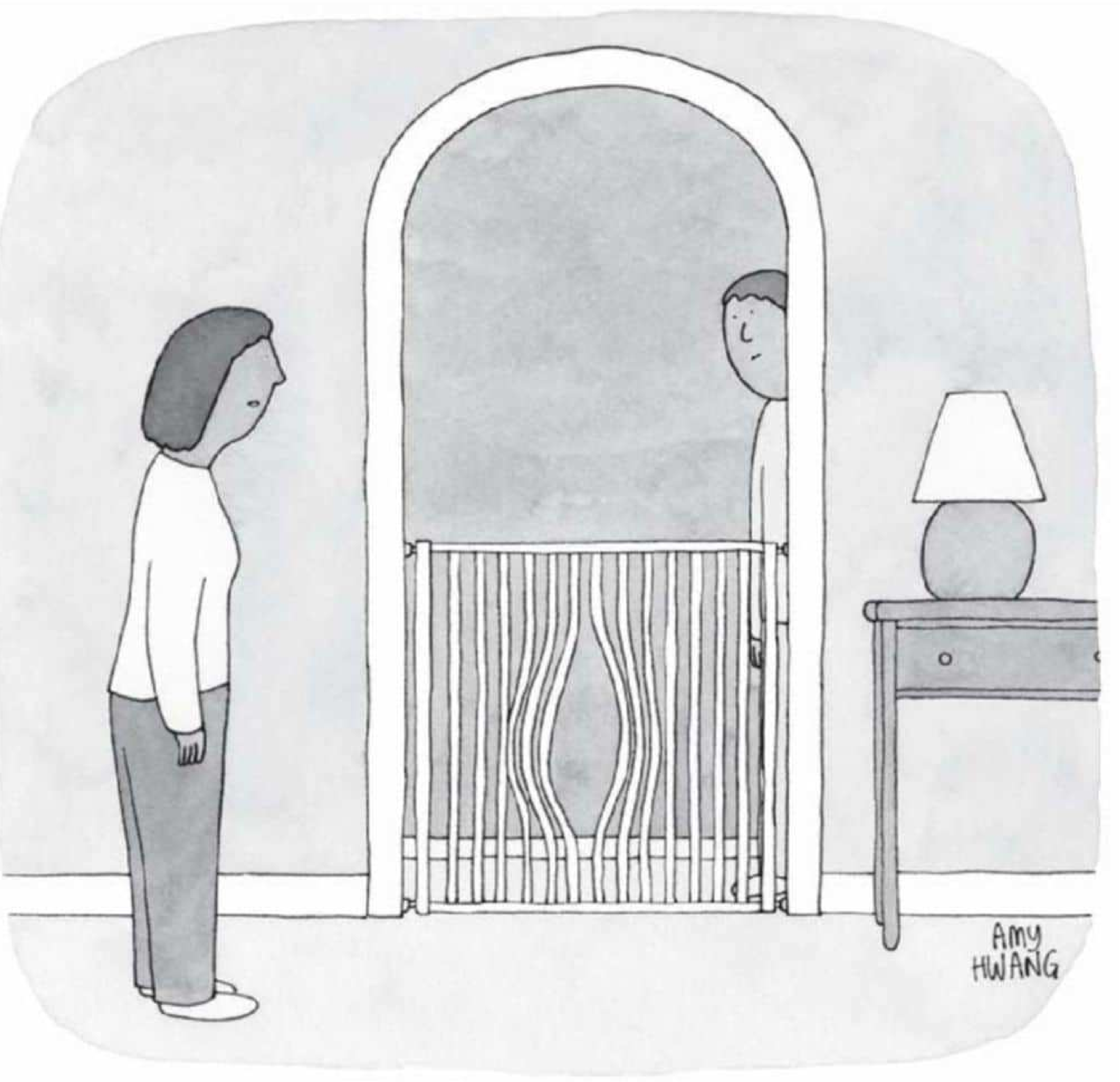
Chief among all motions was wit, "the swiftest motion of the braine," Cavendish wrote in "The Worlds Olio," a collection of brief essays and aphorisms. Wit was thought at its most natural, agile, active, and self-governing. It created and delighted in its own movements, without leaning on the encrusted knowledge of scholars or societies. "Wit is neither to be learnt nor gotten, for it is a free gift of nature, and disclaimes art," she wrote. Wit seized upon the slimmest shade of an idea, and fashioned "Heavens, and Hells, Gods, and Devils." Its vitality allowed the wholly invented worlds of one person's imagination to lay claim to the passionate reverence of another's.

Within Cavendish's expanding philosophy of motion, wit emerged as a guiding thread, especially after she and her husband returned to England following the restoration of the monarchy, in 1660. William was disappointed in his hope of a position at Charles II's court, though he was eventually made a duke. The couple settled at Welbeck Abbey, his woodland estate in Nottinghamshire. They found it bare, its furniture spoiled, and there was much unpleasantness with the Duke's children, who cast aspersions on their stepmother for meddling in their father's affairs. Still, compared with the upheavals of war and exile, these were minor tribulations. "In peace there is the best wits, and that wit is purest and finest, when the minde is most quiet and peaceable," the Duchess wrote. "In peace there is little or nothing but what they create from their own brain."

How could one come to know the motions of wit? Here Cavendish left off her quarrel with Hobbes and turned to the "Modern Microscopical or Dioptrical Writers"—Descartes, Hooke, Boyle—whose splendid and costly instruments, she insisted, had deceived them as to the true nature of motion. In her 1666 treatise, "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy," she complained that the lenses of microscopes were fractured, flawed, and unevenly shaped, and that their mirrors produced distorted figures, like "a high heel to a short legg." Lice appeared as large as lobsters, while the wings of birds were abnormally stretched, their feathers streaked with garish colors. "How shall a feather inform us of the interior nature of a Bird?" she wondered. She rejected experiments that used this "brittle Art" to augment the senses, no matter how reasonable their conclusions were. That the pain of a bee sting was caused by venom, that a rainbow was the prismatic refraction of light, that snails have teeth—she refused, simply refused, to believe it.

As science, her thinking was doomed; poetry and knowledge were cleaving apart. Still, images of real beauty sprang

"Is that really what I look like?"



"I think he's outgrown the baby gate."

• •

from between the cracks. The thirty-seven entries in "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy" do not prosecute a single argument. They assemble a menagerie of bees, butterflies, snails, and leeches, with the same devotion that another woman might have lavished upon her jewels. The seeds of vegetables and the beard of a wild oat are presented with fanatical tenderness. Where her philosophizing is not touched by wonder at nature's designs, it condemns man's "deluding Glasses." But even her strongest condemnations cast a spell: "If the edge of a knife, or point of a needle were naturally and really so as the microscope presents them, they would never be so useful as they are; for, a flat or broad plain-edged knife would not cut, nor a blunt globe pierce so suddenly another body."

All manner of errors occurred when men used instruments to produce copies from copies. "Art, for the most part, makes hermaphroditical, that is, mixt figures, partly Artificial, and partly Natural," she wrote. She intended her art to be the purest extension of her thought, of her singularly sensitive soul. "I *Language* want to dresse my *Fancies* in," she had written in "Poems, and Fancies." Now she began to fashion a garment "loose, and thin," an unpretentious idiom by which she could represent the invisible motion of wit.

Appended to "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy" was "The Blazing World," Cavendish's only novel, and her most lastingly significant writing. In a preface, Cavendish invokes fiction as the plainest and most peaceable genre for the expression of wit. "The end of Reason, is Truth; the end of Fancy, is Fiction," she argues. Fiction could be framed however she pleased, without any regard for whether her creations existed outside her mind. It was a sovereign realm, and she was its supreme ruler: "For I am not Covetous, but as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be: which makes, that though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second; yet, I endeavour to be, *Margaret* the First." Yet wit did not command armies. It abjured violent acts of death or dispossession. Even more encouraging, its powers of creation were available to all. It was "in every ones power to do the like," she offered—to make a world and to rule it, too.

"The Blazing World" begins with the abduction of a noble maiden by a merchant, a man half crazed by the lady's youth and beauty. They sail from the shores of her homeland into a tempest, a "violent motion of the Wind," which—mercifully, magically—does not dash their boat to pieces against the ice and the waves but steers it across the North Pole of this world, to the pole of a world that adjoins it. The merchant freezes to death, but the lady reaches land and is rescued by strange voyagers in ships made of gold and leather.

Each ship is unique in its splendor, yet "so ingeniously contrived, that they could fasten them together as close as a Honey-comb." Each voyager is of a singular shade: "Some appear'd of an Azure, some of a deep Purple, some of a Grass-green, some of a Scarlet, some of an Orange-colour." They come from a land whose inhabitants are of many species: "Some were Bear-men, some Worm-men, some Fish- or Mear-men . . . some Bird-men, some Fly-men, some Ant-men, some Geese-men, some Spider-men." Yet they speak one language, worship one God, and obey one leader, the Emperor. When they bring the lady to him, he makes her his Empress and grants her absolute power of rule. Her first act is to divide his men into Schools and Societies—experimental philosophers, natural philosophers, astronomers, chemists. Then she summons each of the groups, one at a time, to explain to her the motions that make up their world.

Although many have claimed "The Blazing World" as the first science-fiction novel, it is more accurate to think of it as a missing link in the evolution of Renaissance romance into the novel of ideas. The initial description of the world is not so much a sensuous rendering as it is a theory of how parts and wholes may be joined and separated by gentle, even imperceptible motions. The explanations offered by each group of specialists, concerning the moon, the sun, the planets, and the animals of the world, take the form of Socratic dialogues with the Empress, with ideas and images lifted from "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy." The Empress thrills to didacticism, to setting her men straight. Where the Duchess of Newcastle debated the scholars of the Royal Society, here the Empress corrects her mixed figures, a scenario as comic as Circe discoursing with her pigs. All of "The Blazing World" revolves around an outlandish, if touching, Royalist fantasy: that there might exist a world of learned men who prize a single woman's natural, earnest intelligence so highly that they happily accept her authority over them.

Yet to be mistress of her domain is not enough for the Empress, who wants to share this vision of utopia with the people of her land, so that it might settle the factions that have turned on their ruler. She calls on a new group of functionaries: the immaterial spirits, composed of the swiftest motion and thus capable of moving between worlds. She orders them to journey to her world and bring back the soul of a scribe. The spirits consider and reject the souls of Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, and Hobbes, and finally offer her the soul of a woman, the Duchess of Newcastle. "Although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious," the spirits explain, "the principle of her Writings, is Sense and Reason, and she will without question, be ready to do you all the service she can."

Here "The Blazing World" transforms into a metafictional romance of writing. Wit may be the language of the soul, but writing is its vehicle. By joining mind to hand, writing functions as a superior transport for moving fancies from the inside of the mind to the outside of the body. As Cavendish conceived of it, writing invites souls to live in corporeal figures. In "The Blazing World," the service that writing provides to wit, and wit to writing, is analogous to the highest form of love. "That *Platonicks* believed, the Souls of Lovers lived in the Bodies of their Beloved," a spirit tells the Empress, as she tries to understand what, precisely, the relationship between her and the Duchess will be. She asks the spirit to bring her the Duchess's soul, "which the Spirit did; and after she came to wait on the Empress, at her first arrival the Empress imbraced and saluted her with a Spiritual kiss; then she asked her whether she could write?"

The Empress and the Duchess as Platonick Lovers? A Spiritual kiss? A gender-studies professor might rub her hands in glee, but Cavendish, in her poems and philosophical writings, often conducted dialogues between two parts of her own divided mind. In the argument that opens "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy," she casts the two speakers as her former self and her latter self. In "The Blazing World," she is both Empress and Duchess, both the conjurer of wit and its emissary, scribbling everything that we have been reading in her ragged handwriting. For the rest of the first part of "The Blazing World," the soul of the Duchess and the soul of the Empress ramble around, making and dissolving worlds in their minds, each persuading the other to fill these worlds with "Creatures proper and useful," "good Laws," and "Arts and Sciences." Which came first, we wonder—the invisible motion of wit, which imagined "The Blazing World," or the visible motion of the hand that inscribed it?

"The Blazing World" has many bizarre touches, but none is more startling than the evolution of the Duchess and the Empress's Platonick twosome into a Platonick threesome. Sensing that the Duke has grown lonely in her absence, the Duchess persuades the Empress to visit his soul in his body. "And then the Duke had three Souls in one Body; and had there been but some such Souls more, the Duke would have been like the *Grand-Signior* in his *Seraglio*, onely it would have been a *Platonick Seraglio*." English literature's first spiritual ménage à trois? Almost certainly. The Duchess's soul is, at first, jealous of the exchanges between the souls of the Duke and the Empress. But, as she assures herself, "no Adultery could be committed" in the realm of thought. Soon, the three souls are amusing one another with witty scenes, songs, music, and conversation—and, naturally, after a respectable amount of time has passed, the Duchess and the Empress leave the Duke to join the Emperor. English literature's first spiritual swingers? Let us hope more will see the light of day.

At the end of her autobiography, the Duchess insists that the reason she wrote of her life was not to insure her fame as a writer. It was to preserve her soul as "second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle," she wrote, "especially if I should die and my Lord marry again." She did indeed die, in 1673. The Duke did not remarry, and perhaps that was for the best; it is alarming to imagine a new wife reading "A Blazing World" and suddenly finding her mind crowded by the late Duchess's dreamy, quizzical chatter.

William Cavendish cuts a loyal and supremely sympathetic figure. Mocked by his children, ignored by his king, enamored of his horses, and supportive (to a fault, perhaps) of his wife's writing, he was lover and Platonick lover alike. He seemed happy to let the Duchess do more or less as she pleased and to affix his praise to the books that resulted. He saved what were likely his simplest words for her tomb, in Westminster Abbey: "This Dutches was a wise wittie & learned Lady, which her many Bookes do well testifie. She was a most Virtuous & a Loveing & carefull wife & was with her Lord all the time."

One imagines him standing watch over her effigy and reciting her poem "*Motion* is the *Life* of all things":

> As *Darknesse* a *privation* is of *Light*;
> That's when the *Opticke Nerve* is stopt from *Light*:
> So *Death* is even a *cessation* in
> Those *Formes*, and *Bodies*, wherein *Motions* spin.
> As *Light* can only shine but in the *Eye*,
> So *Life* doth only in a *Motion* lye.
> Thus *Life* is out, when *Motion* leaves to bee,
> Like to an *Eye* that's shut, no *Light* can see.

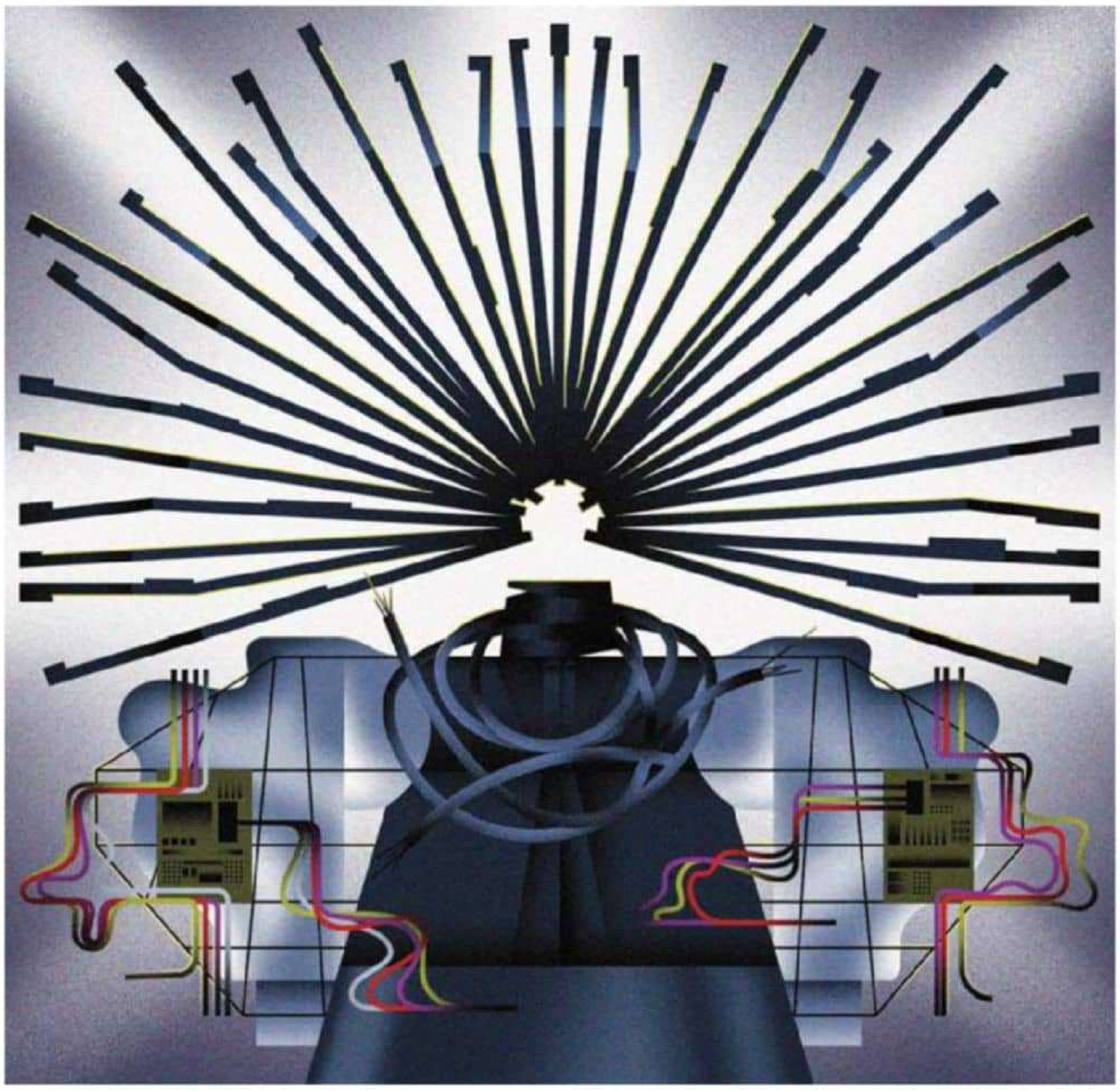
There lay his wife, changed to marble. Her eyes shut, she was draped in a robe with ermine trim, with an inkpot sitting on her skirt and one hand resting on an open book. If you visit her on a winter afternoon, when the light drifts through the Abbey's windows, that hand seems to be poised on the brink of motion. Look closely. You just might see it move. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

POST-APOCALYPSE NOW

The experimental Ukrainian opera "Chornobyldorf," at La Mama.

BY ALEX ROSS



In the work, survivors devise new rituals from the detritus of the past.

ILLUSTRATION BY ZHENYA OLIINYK

On the morning of February 24, 2022, air-raid sirens wailed in the streets of Kyiv, heralding a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. When the composer Adrian Mocanu heard the noise, he had a curious reaction. "I thought the sirens sounded like giant wolves howling," he told me, in an e-mail. The aural illusion haunted him, and last year he created a piece called "Time of the Wolves," which blends recordings of sirens and of wolves into a smoldering, eerily expectant electronic soundscape. The title alludes to Michael Haneke's film "Le Temps du Loup," in which a family wanders a contaminated landscape, and also to the Old Norse epic "Völuspá," which contains the line "Wind-time, wolf-time, ere the world falls."

Since 2022, Ukrainian artists have been thrust into a tragic spotlight, and composers are no exception. Their work has popped up on programs around the world, from élite European new-music festivals to, more rarely, American orchestral concerts. A recent online stream from the Dallas Symphony, under the direction of the Ukrainian conductor Kirill Karabits, features Victoria Polevá's Cello Concerto, a mournful post-minimalist meditation, and Anna Korsun's "Terricone," which evokes devastation in the Donbas by directing performers to scream during the opening measures. In mid-January, the Prototype Festival and the venerable East Village venue La Mama hosted the Kyiv-based organization Opera Aperta in a two-hour-long music-theatre piece called "Chornobyldorf," which depicts the desperate aftermath of a future catastrophe. Dystopias are much in vogue in contemporary entertainment. In Ukraine, they count as unadorned realism.

Vladimir Putin's attempted annihilation of Ukraine is premised on the genocidal idea that the nation has no legitimate identity of its own. The richness of Ukrainian musical history, which goes back many centuries, is alone sufficient to disprove that claim. At the same time, the question of identity is complex. Periods of Russian, Polish, and Austrian dominion over Ukrainian territories left a multi-hued cultural legacy. The Jewish population was once so vast that Yiddish became an official language of the Ukrainian People's Republic, the short-lived state that followed the fall of the tsarist empire.

The Soviet era was one of brutal but unsuccessful repression. Boris Lyatoshynsky, the most formidable of twentieth-century Ukrainian composers, felt obliged to follow Soviet socialist-realist principles; after the première of his Third Symphony, in 1951, Communist Party authorities forced him to remove the finale's epigraph, "Peace will defeat war," and to revise that movement in triumphalist style. Still, the implacably sorrowing three-note ostinato of the symphony's second movement hints at Ukrainian suffering not only under Nazi occupation but also under Soviet rule, and that implicit defiance is all the more evident when the Kyiv Symphony plays the piece today.

Younger Ukrainian composers, who came of age in a thoroughly cosmopolitan contemporary-music environment, face a different conundrum. Korsun won notice at the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music and is now based in Germany. Mocanu, who has had residences across Europe, titles his works, variously, in Spanish, English, French, German, Italian, and Romanian. How should worldly European artists respond when their homeland is under attack? In a way, carrying on as before is itself an act of opposition, and that is largely what Mocanu and Korsun have done. Yet "Time of the Wolves" and "Terricone" both register the unavoidable pressure of the war. In Dallas, listeners who might otherwise have closed their ears to Korsun's sonic upheavals could appreciate why she has no use for chords of comfort.

Nationalism is a fount of evil in the modern world, yet it is also an essential pillar of support for the arts. In the end, only fellow-Ukrainians will speak up for Ukrainian composers. The American musicologist Leah Batstone, who is of Ukrainian descent, has gathered considerable resources on the Web site of the Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival, which she founded in New York in 2020. Following her lead, I've been exploring a bracing assortment of modern sounds: Karmella Tsepkolenko's exuberantly chaotic Fifth Symphony; Alla Zagaykevych's anguished Requiem, with an orchestra made up of folk instruments; Maxim Kolomiiets's furiously minimalist "Four Rivers," which invokes rampaging dragons; Alexey Shmurak's quizzically neo-Romantic piano trio "Crocodile in the Bathroom," whose title remains mysterious. All this music suggests a will to create that may outlast the will to destroy.

Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko, the co-composers of "Chornobyldorf," embrace a mode of anarchic, unruly, provocative art-making that would no doubt be shut down if the nation were to fall under Putin's thumb. Born in 1989 and 1984, respectively, they not only write music together but collaborate as performers, librettists, and stage directors, working in conjunction with members of Opera Aperta. The group first staged "Chornobyldorf" in Kyiv in 2020, and later brought it to the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, England, and Lithuania. It's a sprawling multimedia spectacle—at times taxing, at times transporting—of a kind that was often seen at La Mama and like-minded downtown venues in the waning years of the twentieth century.

"Chornobyldorf," or "Chernobyl Village," takes place several centuries after a series of environmental and biological disasters has wiped out modern civilization and left behind a smattering of technological and cultural artifacts. Scattered survivors are discovering the wreckage of the past and fashioning new rituals around it. Priestly costumes are adorned with circuit boards, cords, and other discarded gadgetry. An ecstatic tribal dance unfolds around a cutout of Lenin's head—ancient and modern cults fused. Film segments projected onto a screen behind the stage suggest baptismal ceremonies in a flooded industrial district.

The music, too, arises from the jumbled detritus of a forgotten past. The twanglings of such Ukrainian folk instruments as the bandura and the tsymbaly—the one a kind of harp in the form of a giant lute, the other a relative of the dulcimer—collide with fragments of Baroque opera, blasts of experimental noise, pounding techno beats, and mangled marches. Performance norms are often ignored. The bandura and the tsymbaly are tuned microtonally and pummelled mercilessly. Accordions are dangled from their keyboards like Slinkys, moaning as they expand and retract. The artist Evhen Bal invented several instruments for the occasion, including a cumbersome but imposing three-belled trombone.

The dark absurdism and arcane spirituality of late-period Soviet art hang over the entire affair. Footage of abandoned infrastructure and an empty church brings to mind the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky, particularly when such images are coupled with Bach's chorale prelude "Ich ruf zu dir," which figures heavily in Tarkovsky's "Solaris." At times, the allusions coalesce into indecipherable murk: according to supplemental notes, we were seeing manifestations of Elektra, Dionysus, Ulysses, and Orfeo and Eurydice onstage, but I had difficulty telling one from the other. That members of the ensemble often appear nude seems, if not gratuitous, at least undermotivated. Still, there is no doubting the dire sincerity of the undertaking. The dance around Lenin's head comes across as a cathartic release of pent-up rage.

The power of "Chornobyldorf" resides, above all, in the fearless intensity of the Opera Aperta ensemble. At La Mama, the soprano Yuliia Alieksieieva, the mezzo Diana Ziabchenko, and the baritone Ievgen Malofeiev covered a range of operatic styles, with the latter often ascending into a high falsetto. Marichka Shtyrbulova and Yuliia Vitraniuk rendered polyphonic folk chants with a voluptuous richness of tone. Ihor Boichuk manipulated all manner of percussion in addition to flute, trumpet, and trombone. The cellist Zoltan Almashi, who is also a composer of note, let loose ominous drones one moment and executed elegant Bach the next. (In a section titled "Messe de Chornobyldorf," the Agnus Dei from Bach's Mass in B Minor undergoes a series of mutations, briefly exploding into punk rock.) Grygoriv and Razumeiko, shedding clothes along with the others, handled the strummed instruments.

This year's edition of the Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival, which will take place at the DiMenna Center at the end of March, is scheduled to include a recent chamber-orchestra piece by Grygoriv, titled "Langsam 9M27K." If American customs officials permit, the composer will be playing an unusual instrument: a rocket from a Soviet-designed Uragan launcher. He received this object from a soldier whose piano had been destroyed by a similar projectile. As Grygoriv told the online Ukrainian publication The Claquers, the idea is to extract a musical voice from military hardware—to "demonstrate its energy, its history, and its pain." A video of the work shows Grygoriv applying a bow to the ribs of the rocket and producing sibilant tones.

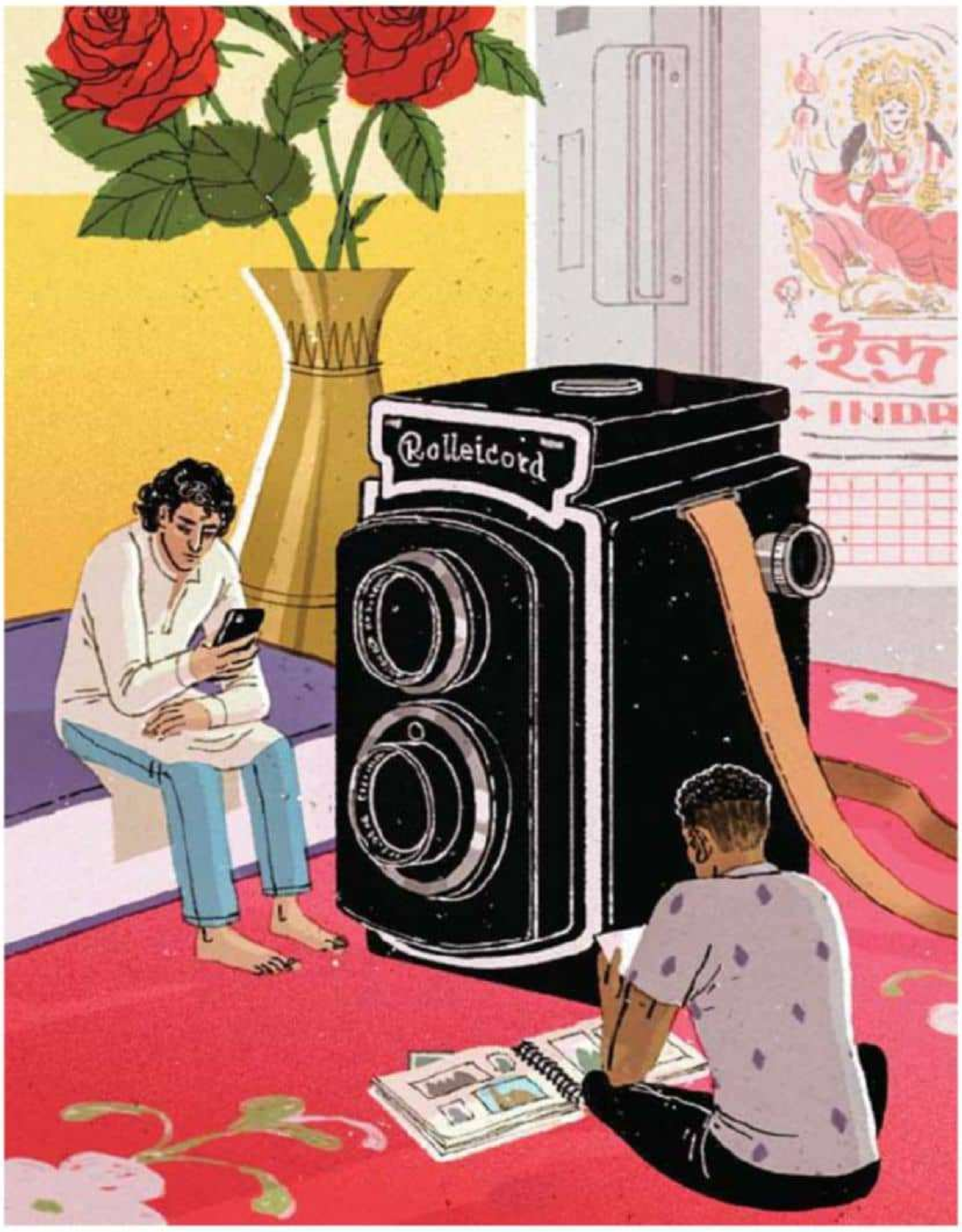
There is something suspect about such an aestheticizing of the technology of death, as Grygoriv acknowledges. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to confront a Western public that is focussing on other crises or simply tuning out altogether. The days are long past when every other classical concert opened with the Ukrainian national anthem. Grygoriv told The Claquers, "I survive only through art, which only revolves around the war. I can't talk about anything else now and express myself through other means. This is our reality." ♦

THE THEATRE

DEPTH OF FIELD

"Public Obscenities" triumphs Off Broadway.

BY HELEN SHAW



The first scene of Shayok Misha Chowdhury's "Public Obscenities," remounted at Brooklyn's Theatre for a New Audience after its exquisite début at the smaller Soho Rep last year, features a flood of language: English and Bangla, spoken simultaneously, without supertitles, at white-water speeds. A Bengali family at dinner is pressing food on an American guest, as his bilingual boyfriend translates between them. The familiarity of this exchange—the guest's politeness, the hosts' inquisitiveness, the affectionate comedy of homecoming—functions like bedrock under the tumult of two languages.

Chowdhury, a librettist, poet, director, and experimental theatre-maker from the fringe, has turned to fine-grained realism for his first major play, and his ease with destabilization has, paradoxically, given this multilingual production an extraordinary steadiness. After that initial, hectic scene, the pace slows to a patient andante, but, though the play runs about three hours (and begins to include supertitles), it does not drag. Along with last year's similarly unhurried "Infinite Life," by Annie Baker, and "Stereophonic," by David Adjmi, "Public Obscenities" has made New York a sudden paradise for stately, naturalistic, complexly layered masterworks.

Abrar Haque and Jakeem Dante Powell star in Shayok Misha Chowdhury's play.

Choton (Abrar Haque), a Bengali American Ph.D. student interested in culture and gender studies, is visiting Kolkata on an academic grant with his cinematographer boyfriend, Raheem (Jakeem Dante Powell). They are working on a "queer archiving project," Choton tells their hosts—his aunt Pishimoni (Gargi Mukherjee) and uncle Pishe (Debashis Roy Chowdhury)—hoping to interview gay and trans Indian subjects, who are invited to the house via Grindr. While Raheem films, Choton talks with the irrepressible Shou (Tashnuva Anan), a glamorous whirlwind who has much to say about where to pick up football players and the secret erotics of police harassment. Choton finds that his own Bangla has limits, particularly around anything having to do with sex. He's perfectly aware that the word "trans," for instance, is not a precise equivalent for Shou's gender-nonconforming *kothi* identity, but he only slowly realizes that he's using the same childish vocabulary for his "*nunu*" that he learned as a kid.

Language is one thing; Chowdhury's ability to create an eloquent narrative out of glances and tensions is another. The home previously belonged to Pishimoni's late father, Choton's grandfather, whose presence lingers as both icon and puzzle. Peiyi Wong's set consists of a high-ceilinged, yellow-and-white parlor, with plaster and concrete surfaces that seem, even in the harsh flicker of fluorescent tubes, somehow chalky and soft. It has been decades since the patriarch's death, but the room is still dominated by a black-and-white photograph of him looking stern, under which Pishimoni, with the help of the family's longtime servant, Jitesh (Golam Sarwar Harun), places daily offerings. (Choton, in a comic moment, has to turn the picture around before he can masturbate.) Raheem, although he speaks almost no Bangla, perceives a great deal, especially when he starts taking portraits with the grandfather's antique camera, which contains a mysterious roll of film from years earlier. Photos are fixed things—"becoming a picture" is a Bangla idiom for death—but the play also shows photography as a dynamic, empathic, often revelatory endeavor. Chowdhury teaches us

ILLUSTRATION BY JASJYOT SINGH HANS

to watch the play as if we were composing a shot: we focus on Jitesh's shy smile, or zoom in on Choton's callousness toward him, as the younger man slips into caste-based myopia.

The house, with its "skin of dust" and slow, circling fans, accentuates the play's air of genteel decay, referencing, among a host of other art works, aristocracy-in-decline masterpieces like "The Cherry Orchard," by Anton Chekhov, and "The Music Room," by Satyajit Ray. (Pishe and Pishimoni—both self-sabotaging, deep-souled clowns—would be at home in either.) Chowdhury isn't operating with Chekhov's or Ray's objectivity, however; he's there among his characters. The set is modelled on the Chowdhury family home in Kolkata, and the playwright has talked about the ways in which he sees himself in Choton. That sense of implication gives "Public Obscenities" an uncanny electric charge.

As a writer, Chowdhury interweaves humor, allusion, gravity, and extended metaphor as if each quality were a musical line, making an integrated symphonic whole. His greatest talent as a director, though, lies in how he uses his spectacular cast. Each virtuoso is gorgeously at ease. Perhaps to prevent us from being dazzled by them all at once, Chowdhury often obscures his performers, putting Raheem and Choton in bed under a mosquito net, lit only by a single phone, or seating Pishe behind a set of shutters, where he pecks away at his computer. Then, when a character comes into the light at center stage—as, say, Jitesh does when he's persuaded to sing—the audience is stunned to discover that person's brilliance. Were these stars hiding in plain sight all along? Perhaps we should have looked more closely.

Success has many parents: "Public Obscenities" was co-commissioned by Soho Rep and the National Asian American Theatre Company, and is presented at T.F.A.N.A. in co-production with the Under the Radar festival and Washington, D.C.,'s Woolly Mammoth. U.T.R. is the surprise in the list—a realistic drama isn't typical experimental-festival fare. Swift and strange is the usual mode, which is why, over the manic January micro-season, I managed to see nineteen shows.

Last year, a certain dreamy nihilism prevailed at the festivals, as artists, possibly still thinking about our enforced inactivity during the pandemic shutdown, fantasized about Earth without mankind. This year, the paradigm shifted from the wishfully apocalyptic to the pessimistically archeological: my favorite shows were full of retrospection and weird rituals from a post-collapse civilization, and as dark as grave dirt. For example, I wholeheartedly loved "Deepe Darknesse," Lisa Fagan and Lena Engelstein's muscular dance-theatre hybrid in the Live Artery festival. It seemed at first like a giddy mashup of nineteen-sixties Italian pop glamour and old-fashioned avant-gardist mess-making (at one point, Engelstein climbed into a sink onstage to get clean), but soon leaned into more occult, Orphic tendencies, especially once the text started dropping hints about how to get past the ferryman in the Underworld.

Even in more comprehensible pieces in Under the Radar, the theme was excavation. For the meditative installation "Cultural Exchange Rate," Tania El Khoury built a vault in the Invisible Dog Art Center and invited us to literally stick our heads inside its cabinets: once we did, we heard her recorded voice, murmuring about her grandmother's border village in Lebanon, where her ancestors have been finding and collecting old coins for generations. In "The Eagle and the Tortoise," Kathryn Hamilton, a.k.a. Sister Sylvester, guided us through a collective reading experience, having us page through our own copies of a handmade book about, among other things, the Turkish government bulldozing the ancient streets of a Kurdish city. The show encouraged us to take an eagle-eyed perspective, circling high above, imagining the old maze of buildings and alleyways.

Like Choton, everyone seemed to be taking up the idea of archive. In "Hubris Always Gets You in the End," in the Exponential Festival, the couple Jessica Jelliffe and Jason Craig, better known as the founders of the beloved company Banana Bag & Bodice, returned to New York City after eight years in quasi-retreat from performance. At Target Margin's converted-warehouse venue, in Brooklyn, they put many of their old props out in rows, and heaped others against the walls, like potsherds at a dig site. They reënacted and revised a few scenes from past shows, and then seemed to retire all over again. I love the January festivals; they are always the most galvanizing part of the New York season. But this year, for the first time, I was almost relieved when they began to slow. In show after show, artists were taking disappearance for granted. What will we preserve? What can we save from the wreckage? Going outside into the cold, I was almost surprised to find the world still there. ♦

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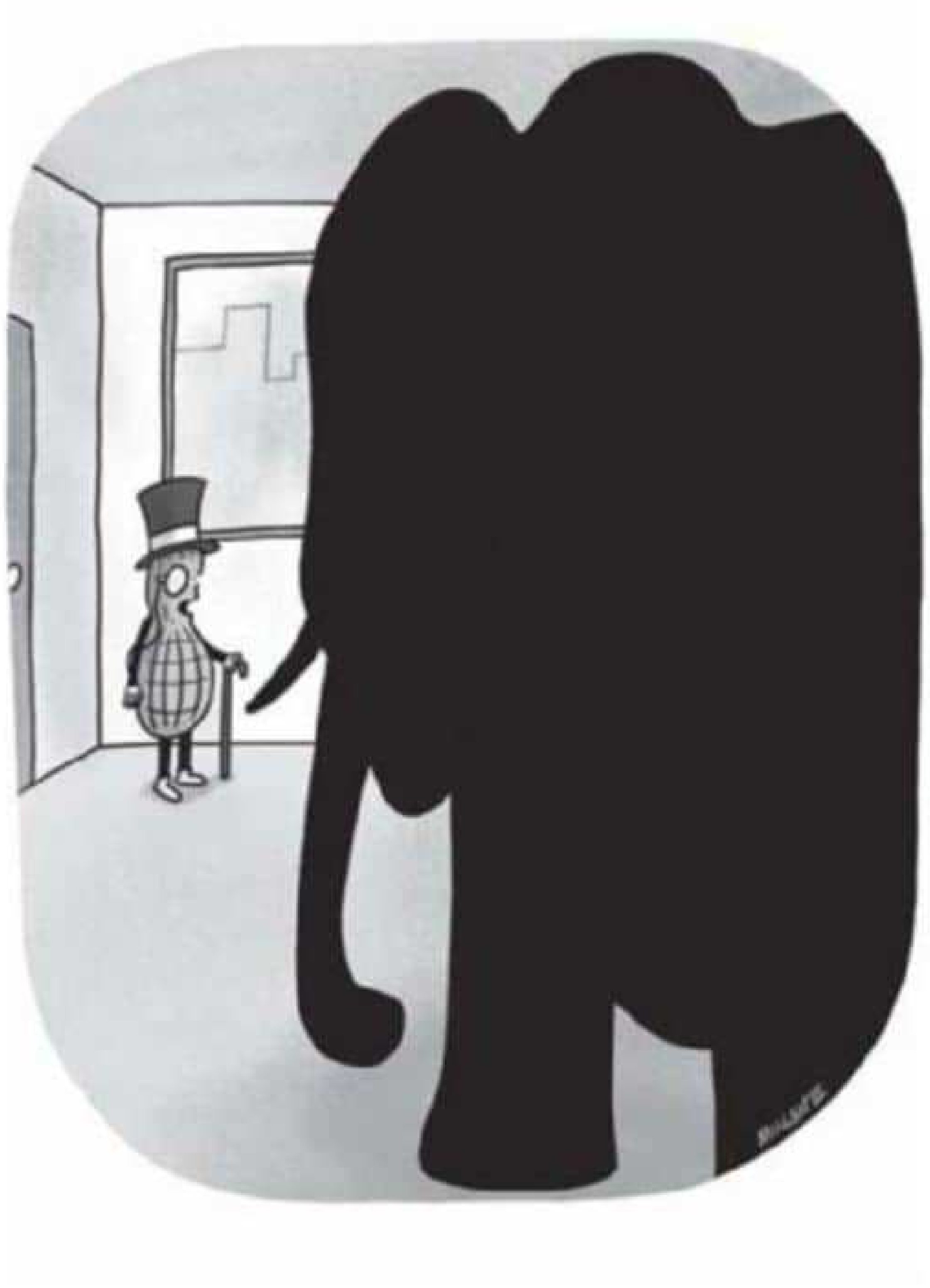
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lonnie Millsap, must be received by Sunday, February 4th. The finalists in the January 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 26th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

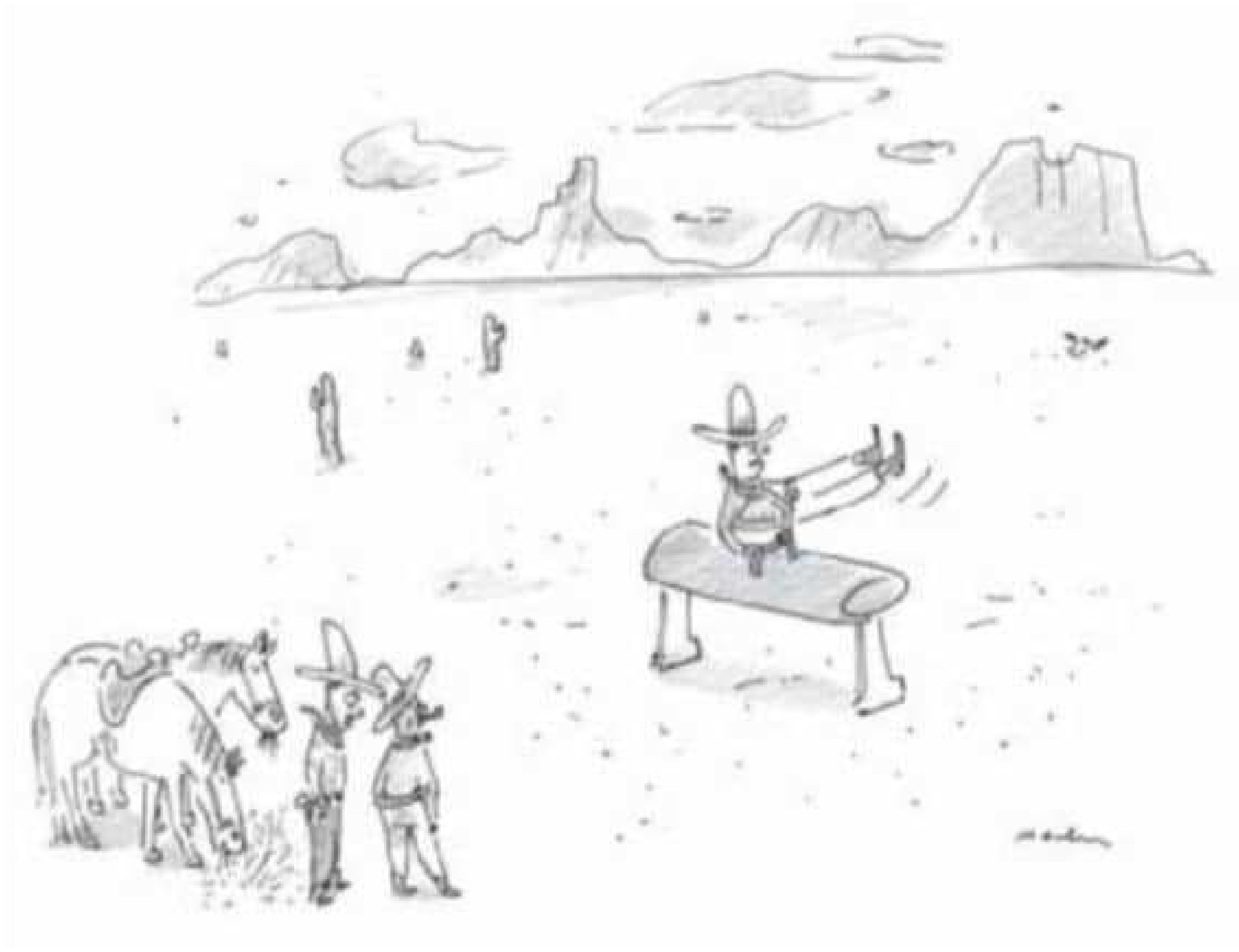
THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

………

THE FINALISTS

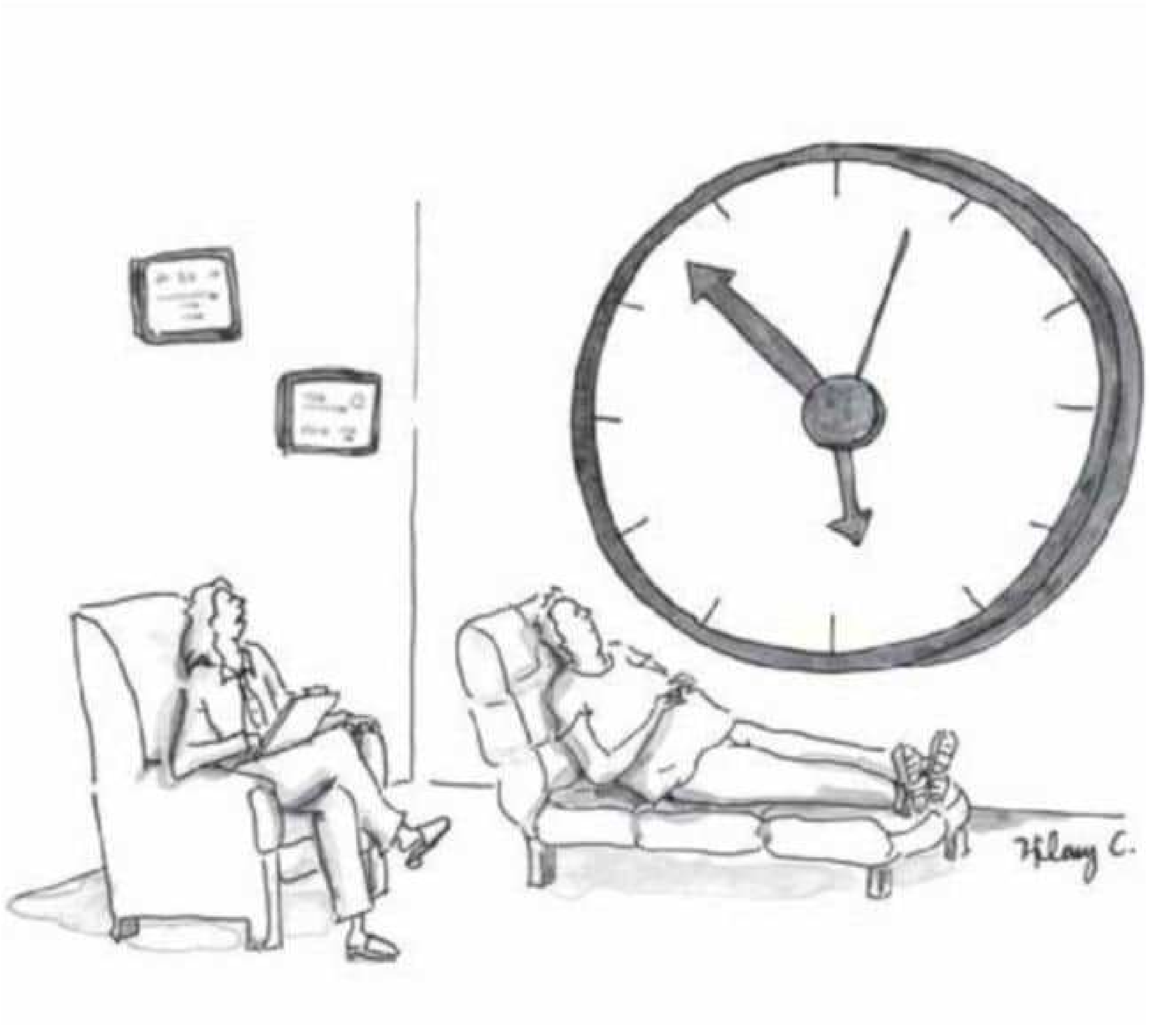


“He's also the fastest gun in the West, so no one wants to tell him.”
Leah Barrett Demers, Arlington, Mass.

“Just another one-trick pony.”
Aaron Zucker, Canton, Conn.

“His other horse is in the shop.”
Roger Wyllie, Ottawa, Ont.

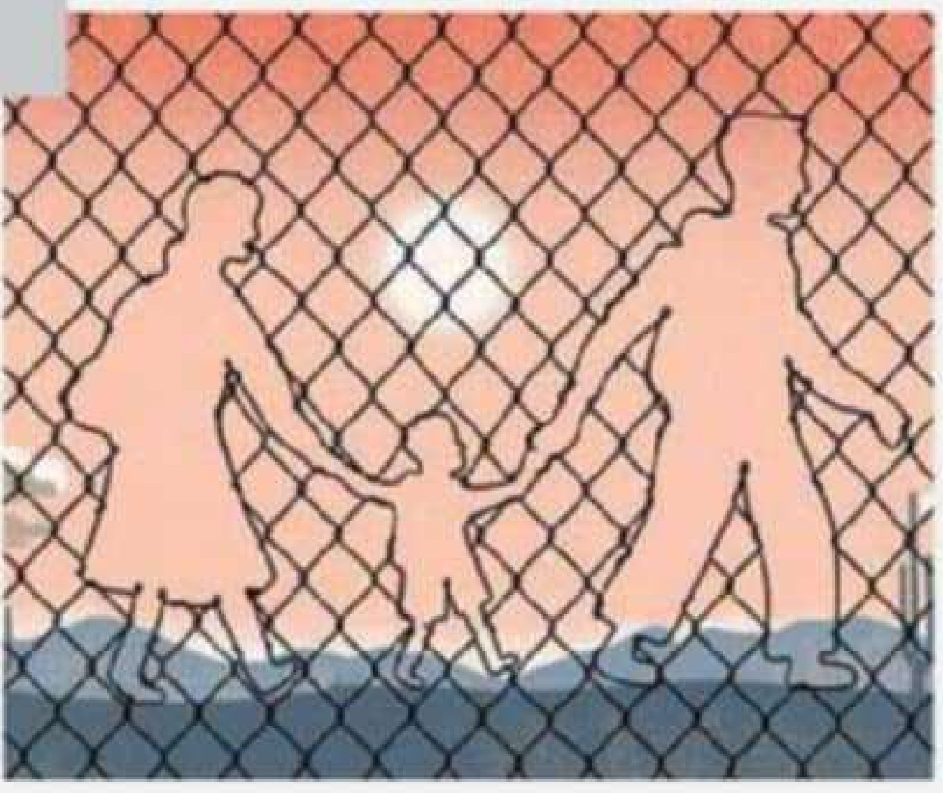
THE WINNING CAPTION



“I don't know. What time do you think it is?”
Margaret Waller, Claremont, Calif.

THE NEW YORKER

Conversations that change your world.



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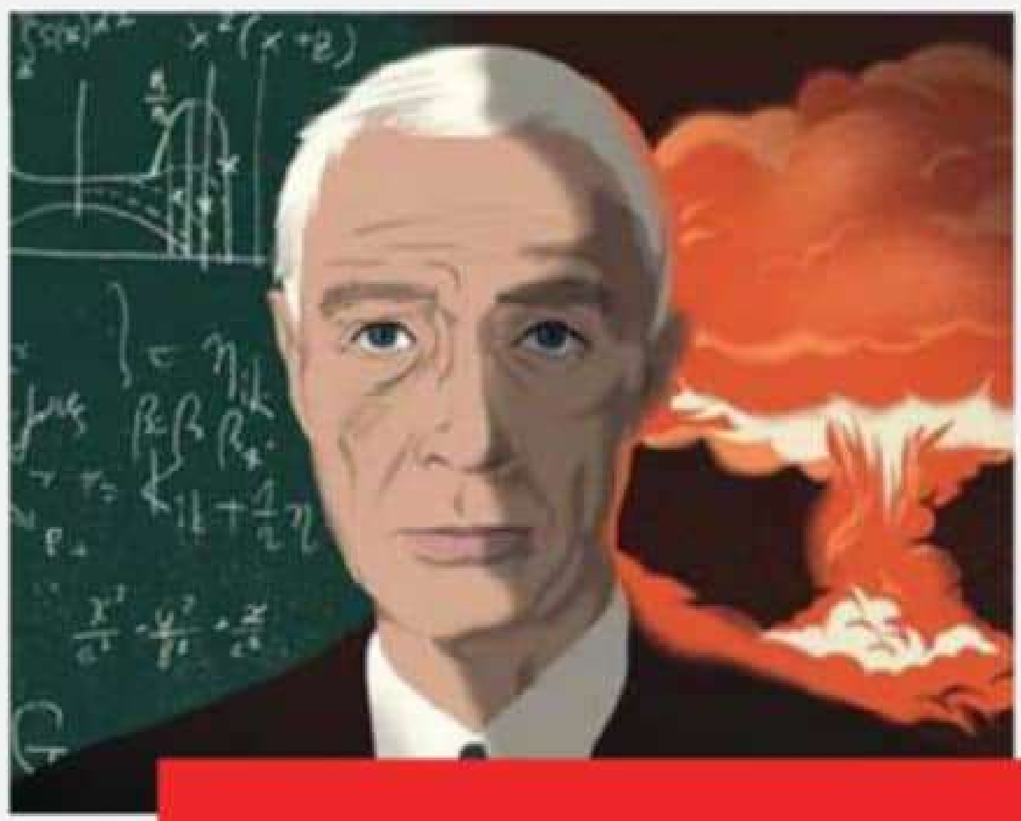

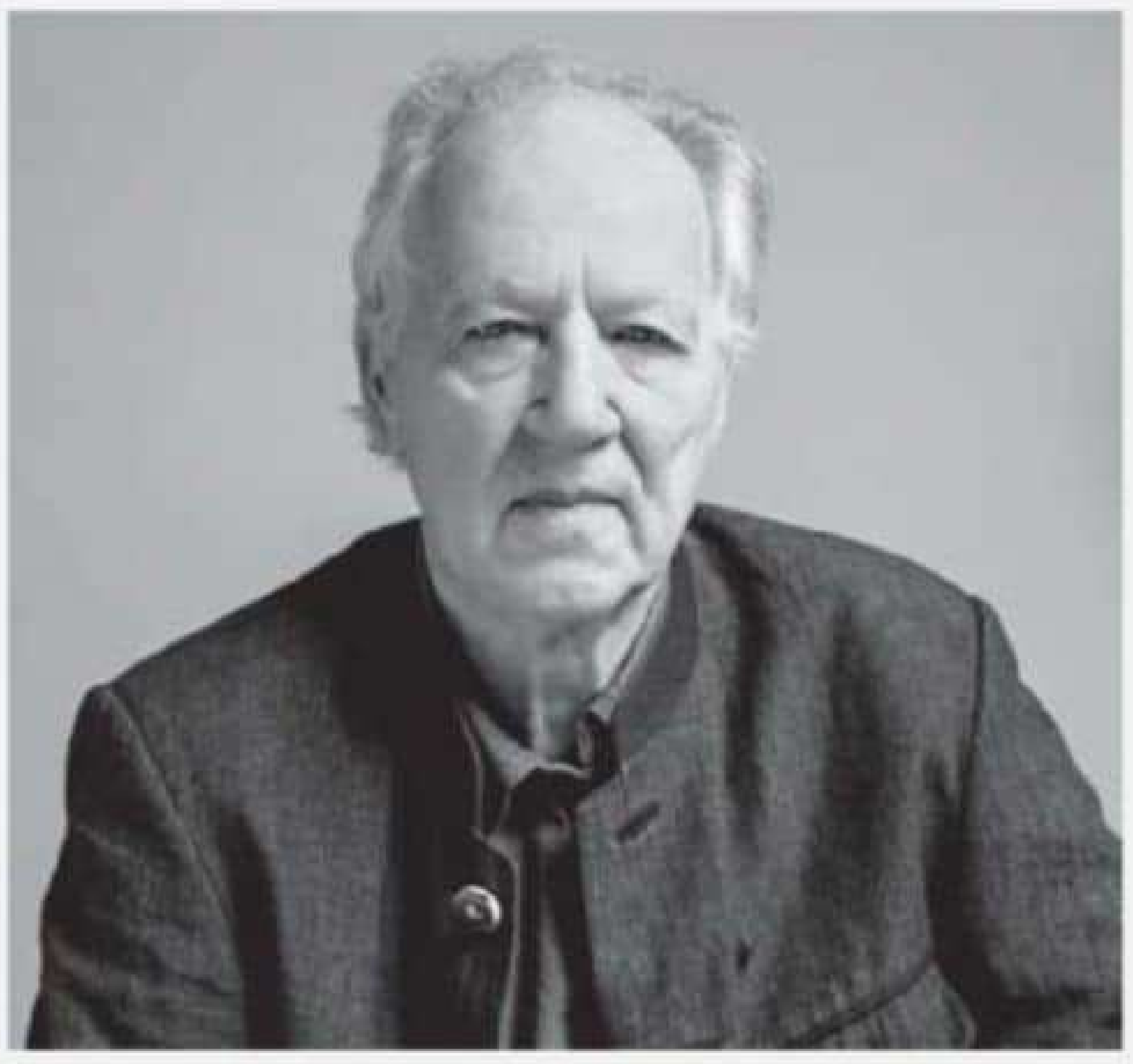

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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

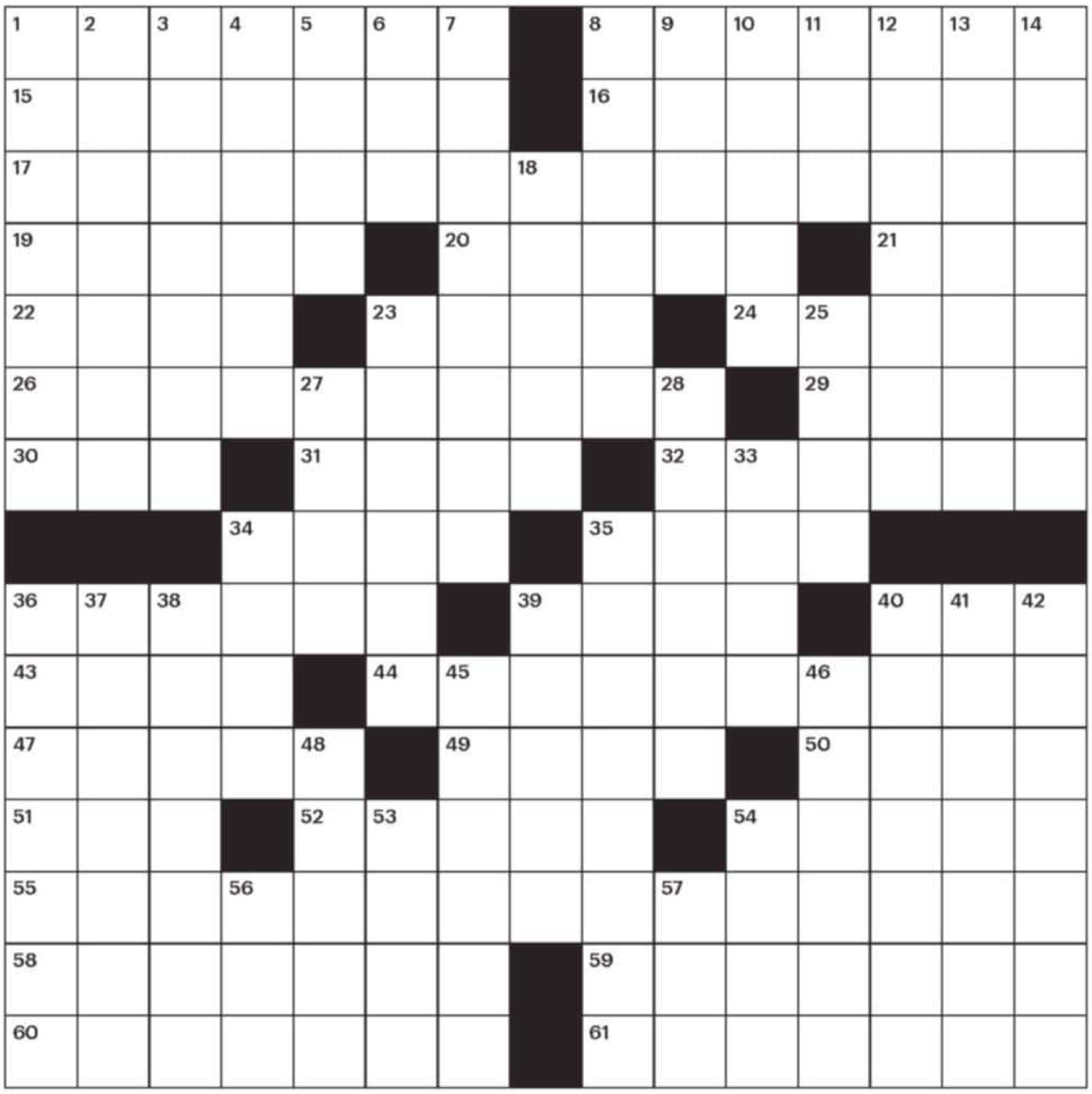
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY ELIZABETH C. GORSKI

ACROSS

1 Don Q competitor
8 Begin
15 Boris Johnson, for one
16 Florida ___ (popular food fish)
17 Its north and south poles are close together
19 2001 Nobel Peace Prize recipient
20 Tools for duels
21 Univ.-application datum
22 Gaze
23 First name in an 1857 decision
24 Take things badly?
26 Denizen of an underground colony
29 "Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion" director Petri
30 Monogram on some designer sunglasses
31 ___ place
32 Sandals, e.g.
34 For fear that
35 Brewer's ingredient
36 Quiescence
39 Punch
40 East Lansing sch.
43 Unique
44 Gets out of Dodge
47 "Millennium" trilogy author Larsson
49 Father of Phobos
50 Algerian city where Albert Camus's "The Plague" is set
51 ___ Beach (Honolulu suburb)
52 Presidential middle name of the eighteen-eighties
54 Alternative to a snake
55 Professional who might have novel ideas for healing?
58 Open, in a way
59 Party pick
60 2023 IMAX documentary about NASA's James Webb Space Telescope
61 Final story in James Joyce's collection "Dubliners"



DOWN

1 Panglossian advice
2 Contrite race in Nancy Kress's sci-fi novel "Steal Across the Sky"
3 ___ transplant (procedure also called a keratoplasty)
4 "Master of None" star Aziz
5 It meant nothing to Napoleon
6 Gustav Mahler's "___ Lied von der Erde"
7 Hardwired
8 Tanning-bed attire
9 Weighty work
10 Stockpile
11 Dungeons & Dragons genre, for short
12 Hybrid fruit
13 It's better than nothing in your hand
14 Few
18 Journal pages?
23 Big-rig filler
25 Check
27 Numbered hwys.
28 Trio depicted in Sandro Botticelli's "Primavera"
33 Lodge membership
34 Maurice Ravel's "Ma Mère ___" ("Mother Goose Suite")
35 Symphony section
36 American Beauty, before its opening?
37 Interlace
38 Easily swayed
39 Vaughan with the album "Sassy"
40 Glacial deposit
41 Birthplace of Dylan Thomas
42 Overlooked
45 Lacking refinement
46 Quiescent
48 Dressage concerns
53 Strong, dark beer
54 Agatha Christie title
56 Baby seat?
57 "Ruh-___!"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

P	A	V	E	S	■	P	T	A	S	■	S	P	A	T
O	L	I	V	E	G	R	O	V	E	■	A	L	D	I
S	P	E	E	D	L	I	M	I	T	■	N	E	E	D
H	O	T	S	A	U	C	E	S	■	I	T	A	L	Y
■	■	■	■	R	E	Y	■	■	E	R	A	S	E	■
A	F	R	A	I	D	■	M	A	D	A	M	E	■	■
L	O	O	N	S	■	S	E	R	E	N	A	D	E	S
A	R	M	Y	■	T	W	A	I	N	■	R	O	D	E
S	T	A	G	E	H	A	N	D	■	B	I	N	G	E
■	■	N	U	D	I	T	Y	■	R	R	A	T	E	D
■	P	R	E	Y	S	■	■	W	O	E	■	■	■	■
S	E	U	S	S	■	G	R	A	Y	A	R	E	A	S
O	T	I	S	■	Q	U	E	S	A	D	I	L	L	A
A	C	N	E	■	T	R	I	P	L	E	P	L	A	Y
R	O	S	S	■	R	U	N	S	■	D	E	A	N	S

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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